New Challenges in ELT (English Language Teaching): Virtual Exchange and Mobility

Michele Russo
University of Foggia, Italy

Abstract

        The present study focuses on an experience of ELT through a recent virtual exchange and mobility project, called ITALengUSA. The project aimed to foster connections between Italian and American students from different universities and high schools in Italy and in the USA, with the purpose of enhancing their proficiency in Italian and English. The work begins with an analysis of the paremiological resources employed during the speaking sessions of the project, as the syntactic and prosodic features of idioms and proverbs facilitated the students' learning process. Owing to their culture-bound nature, paremiological resources were extensively used to engage and motivate students, helping them to improve their target language through metaphors and cultural aspects (Gedik, 2024; Granger & Meunier, 2008; Russo, 2024). After investigating the learning methods used by students, including cooperative learning, scaffolding and languaging (Nicaise, 2022), the analysis dwells on the effectiveness of translanguaging (Kramsch & Hua, 2016), which involves the practice of using more than one language in conversations. Translanguaging enabled the students of the project to integrate terms from their L1 into conversations occurring in L2, allowing them to co-construct meanings with their partners through linguistic negotiation and reformulation. Considering Coonan's (2011) concept of "international posture", the work concludes by discussing the incorporation of cultural aspects in the speaking sessions of the programme, drawing comparisons between Americanness, associated with globalisation and multiculturalism by Italian students, and Italianness, associated with art and

culture by American students. The ITALengUSA programme, which is expanding and involving an increasing number of educational institutions in Italy and in the USA, has thus paved the way for the democratisation of language learning through collaboration with native speaker students (Novak & Tucker, 2021).

Introduction

Although remote teaching is not new in teaching practice, it has surged in recent years due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The literature has explored the numerous challenges associated with remote teaching during the pandemic, particularly for younger pupils, who undoubtedly benefit from eye contact and in-person lessons. When the pandemic broke out, many teachers struggled to deal with the new challenges posed by remote teaching. However, as the health emergency became less threatening, educational institutions worldwide continued to implement some of the teaching practices that had emerged during the pandemic. One of the most significant problems caused by the pandemic was, among other things, the suspension of exchange programs due to border closures and lockdowns, which restricted traveling except under particular circumstances. As a result, an increasing number of universities adopted virtual exchange and virtual mobility, enabling many students to maintain connections with foreign institutions and participate in international educational programs (Vriens et al., 2010). Remote teaching continued to be implemented, often as part of blended courses, even after the health emergency had ended, and today "[…] virtual exchange (VE) programs are increasingly being promoted as alternative methods for acquiring the international skills needed in a globalised world" (Symeonidis & Impedovo, 2023, p. 822)[1]. In particular, virtual mobility and exchange programs are employed as forms of interactive remote teaching, allowing students to be in contact with people from foreign educational institutions while avoiding the costs associated with traditional exchange programs.

In light of this introductory background, this work means to present a virtual exchange program, named ITALengUSA, which enabled a selected number of students from the Department of Humanities of the University of Foggia, Italy, to virtually meet their American counterparts. The University of Foggia has been offering courses in foreign languages for the past four years, including majors in French, Spanish, German, and English. However,

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[1] For further information about blended courses, see Ligorio et al., 2009.

unlike their colleagues in other language majors, English majors have faced difficulties in participating in exchange programs with universities in English-speaking countries, since the UK significantly reduced its agreements and exchange programs with foreign universities. Meanwhile, studying in the USA is prohibitively expensive, while Irish universities have reached their capacity with existing agreements. Consequently, English majors at the University of Foggia have not yet had the opportunity to participate in an exchange programme with an English-speaking country. The author of this article, recognising the challenges faced by English majors at the University of Foggia, contacted the coordinator of a virtual exchange programme (ITALengUSA) between Italian and American educational institutions. The coordinator of this programme teaches Spanish at the University of Chicago, USA, and suggested involving seven students from the University of Foggia in the program. This collaboration provided a valuable opportunity for the students from Foggia to engage in a cross-cultural academic exchange with their American colleagues. The students were selected by means of a test and were chosen specifically from the master's degree programme in Languages for International Communication; they had never been offered the opportunity to participate in an exchange programme with an English-speaking country due to the aforementioned pandemic-related restrictions. Before describing the programme and the activities implemented, it is worth providing some insights into the structure and organization of this project. The programme originated from the need to promote Italian and American English languages and cultures. Its aim is to enhance the practice of Italian and English and to encourage students to socialise and form friendships. The programme started in 2020 during the pandemic with the aim of motivating students, helping them to find enthusiasm for learning and improving a new language while making friends at the same time. The programme involves students from Italian universities and high schools and pairs them with students from American universities and high schools. The students meet once a week on Zoom for one hour. During the session, they discuss specific topics in Italian for the first half hour and in English for the second half hour. Each student from the University of Foggia was paired with an American student. When the programme started, each pair met weekly for an hour, co-tutoring each other in language practice. The Italian student tutored their American colleague for the first half hour, while the American student tutored their Italian colleague for the second half hour. The students acted as tutors and supported each other in practising both languages, following a peer-tutoring strategy. At the end of the semester, the project coordinator and professors evaluated the students' progress and proficiency. The topics for the weekly conversations covered everyday situations and current issues and included daily routines,

hobbies, comparisons between American and Italian habits and traditions, education, festivals, popular culture, TV series, and films. As the coordinator stated, the program's motto is "practice makes perfect". Students were expected to prepare their topics in advance upon receiving the weekly topic by email from the coordinator to ensure that conversations were well-structured. The students from the University of Foggia started the programme in February 2024, which continued through April 2024. They had ten meetings, which took place on Sunday afternoons in Italy and on Sunday mornings in the USA. As mentioned, each pair of students met in a designated virtual room where they interacted for an hour without their coordinator or professors, who could however enter the students' rooms at any time to ensure everything was going smoothly and to provide assistance if needed.

Methods
Paremiological resources and culture-oriented learning[2]

As mentioned earlier, the topics to be discussed by students covered various everyday situations, such as describing the house, clothing, music, holidays, festivals, love, students' cities, food, health, and more. Moreover, what made the remote teaching engaging, according to students, was that the discussion of each topic, communicated to them in Italian and English via email beforehand, always included the discussion of an idiomatic expression. For each meeting, pairs of students were asked to discuss two different expressions, one in Italian and one in English. This approach highlights that idioms and proverbs are essential tools in language teaching. The following tables illustrate some of the idioms discussed during the meetings:

Table 1. Italian idioms discussed by students

Italian idiom	English equivalent	Literal translation of the Italian idiom into English
Costare un occhio della testa	Cost an arm and a leg	Cost an eye of the head
Filare liscio come l'olio	To go smoothly	To flow as smoothly as oil
L'amore non è bello se non è litigarello	A good relationship isn't fun if there's no arguing	Love isn't fun if there's no arguing
La ciliegina sulla torta	The icing on the cake	The little cherry on the cake
Mogli e buoi dei paesi tuoi	Marry a girl from your own town	Wives and oxen from your own villages
Non avere peli sulla lingua	Not mince (your) words	Having no hairs on (your) tongue

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[2] The proverbs, idioms and tongue twisters listed in tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 were emailed to the author of the article by the students.

Table 2. English idioms discussed by students

English idiom	Italian equivalent	Literal translation of the Italian equivalent into English
In a nutshell	In poche parole	In a few words
Middle of nowhere	In mezzo al nulla, in un posto sperduto	In the middle of nothing / in a remote place
Once in a blue moon	Una volta ogni morte di papa	Only when the pope dies
On cloud nine	Al settimo cielo	On the seventh heaven
The last straw (that breaks the camel's back)	L'ultima goccia (che fa traboccare il vaso)	The last drop (that makes the vase overflow)
To tie the knot	Sposarsi	To get married

As can be seen, not all of the idiomatic expressions in the list are translatable, as they embody specific historical and cultural elements of the language, such as "L'amore non è bello se non è litigarello" or "Mogli e buoi dei paesi tuoi". In addition to idiomatic expressions, students were asked to discuss and comment on tongue-twisters in both Italian and English, helping their partners to pronounce them correctly and as quickly as possible. This challenging exercise increased students' motivation for immersing themselves in the essence of the languages. Here are some of the tongue twisters that students taught to each other:

Table 3. English tongue twisters discussed by students

English tongue twisters
Betty bought some butter, but the butter was bitter, so Betty bought a better butter to make the bitter butter better.
How much wood would a woodchuck chuck, if a woodchuck could chuck wood?
Red lorry, yellow lorry, red lorry, yellow lorry.
She sells seashells by the seashore. The shells she sells are seashells for sure.

Table 4. Italian tongue twisters discussed by students

Italian tongue twisters	Literal translation into English
Apelle figlio di Apollo fece una palla di pelle di pollo, tutti i pesci vennero a galla per vedere la palla di pelle di pollo fatta da Apelle figlio di Apollo.	Apelle, son of Apollo, made a ball of chicken skin; all the fish went afloat to see the ball of chicken skin made by Apelles, son of Apollo.
Il questore a quest'ora in questura non c'è.	The police commissioner isn't at the police station at this time.
Sopra la panca la capra campa, sotto la panca la capra crepa.	On the bench, the goat lives; under the bench, the goat kicks the bucket/dies.
Tre tigri contro tre tigri.	Three tigers against three tigers.
Trentatré trentini entrarono in Trento, tutti e trentatré trotterellando.	Thirty-three people from Trentino [an Italian region] entered Trento [the main city in Trentino region], all thirty-three trotting.

The effectiveness of this virtual exchange programme consisted, among other things, in encouraging students to use idioms and particular expressions, such as tongue twisters. It is widely known that idiomatic expressions and proverbs have been often considered sophisticated and picturesque elements of a language and have not been extensively used in language teaching. With regard to English language teaching, in particular, various studies (Cardona, 2011) show that idiomatic expressions and proverbs are usually employed as time fillers and are often relegated to the margins of lessons. English textbooks for Italian students include sections that list the main idiomatic expressions and proverbs along with their Italian translations. Some exercises in English textbooks require students to match idioms and proverbs with their corresponding Italian translations. Idioms and proverbs are fixed phrases, convey specific prosodic features of the language and express apodictic and wise messages based on popular beliefs and ancestral experience (Gedik, 2024; Granger & Meunier, 2008; Russo, 2024). Therefore, both idiomatic expressions and proverbs are effective linguistic formulas that help students to memorise new terms and entire expressions, as they fit, like pieces of a puzzle, chunks of words, into a longer sentence. They read like refrains and lexical patterns found in a song and, as such, they lend themselves to be learnt more easily compared to when students are required to compose sentences focusing on word order and grammar. Considering the culture-bound nature of proverbs and idioms, recent studies have been investigating their role in language learning as well as their effectiveness in conveying cultural nuances (Lewis, 1993). One of the main reasons why idiomatic expressions and proverbs have seldom been used in language teaching is related to their semantic and prosodic peculiarities, which do not always prompt students to reflect on grammar and lexis. The latter, as is well known, have been the focus of traditional teaching methods for many years. Despite numerous innovations in teaching practices, including cooperative learning, flipped classrooms, and pair and group work, idiomatic expressions and proverbs do not usually represent primary linguistic resources in English textbooks for Italian students. Nevertheless, when learners communicate in a second language, they often seek to employ striking sentences, primarily aiming to produce metaphorical and prosodic effects. Idioms and proverbs should not be regarded as mere "icing on the cake" in language teaching; rather, they are essential linguistic resources that improve learners' communicative skills.

In the context of the virtual exchange programme discussed in this paper, idioms and proverbs were selected based on various factors, including their frequency of use, their similarity to equivalent expressions in the target language, and their semantic transparency. The Italian and English idioms and proverbs suggested for students to discuss are commonly used, and their

meanings are more or less deducible from context. The Italian proverb "costare un occhio della testa", for example, can be understood by English-speaking students even as an isolated phrase, as the collocation "costare un occhio" suggests something expensive. The English proverb "to tie the knot", however, is more difficult for Italian students to understand and requires contextualization. After each online meeting, students were asked to share their comments on the experience (some of the students' reviews are quoted in paragraph 4) and describe the strategies they used to interpret specific expressions and co-construct the meanings of idioms and proverbs with their partners. First and foremost, students were encouraged to repeat or paraphrase the expressions, analysing them in their contexts of use. Students asked their partners for further explanations about the expressions. By interacting with their partners, they were able to look into specific terms, proverbs and idioms, focusing on their literal meanings as well as their metaphorical messages and real-life references. The discussion of the metaphorical references helped students to unearth specific meanings (Tornaghi, 2011), revealing the underlying concepts of the expressions from a contrastive and comparative perspective. At the same time, contextualization, along with repetition and rephrasing, was essential for students to deduce the meanings of the expressions. This process facilitated memorization by allowing learners to experience the use of the expressions in context with their native-speaking partners. In Italian educational contexts, as was previously mentioned, proverbs and idioms have historically been given an ancillary role, as they are often listed in English textbooks without context, with only the Italian translation provided.

Learning a foreign language, as is known, involves studying the culture associated with that language, as idiomatic expressions and proverbs usually appear in the form of culture-bound lexical phrases. Every language incorporates specific cultural values and habits, conveyed through linguistic structures and idiolects. As Slezák Polónyová (2018, p. 105) claims, our personal use of the language represents "a considerable marker of who we are, who we wish to be and how we hope to be perceived". Consequently, "learning a new language is like learning a new identity" (Slezák Polónyová, 2018, p. 105). While these notions may appear self-evident, it is necessary to emphasise them because, as Kramsch and Hua (2016, p. 39) explain, in the globalized era English is increasingly considered "a language of economic opportunity not tied to any particular national or regional space or history". Many learners are likely to embrace the belief that a language like English can be learned without its cultural context. As the two scholars suggest, English should be studied with reference to its cultural heritage. This notion obviously applies to other languages as well. The paremiological resources are, therefore, important culture-bound linguistic tools, which enable

students to learn a language through its cultural background. English, in this regard, offers a wide variety of cultural references. To begin with, ELT in secondary schools normally includes the study of the culture of a specific English-speaking country. While British English and British culture remain predominant, American English and American culture are increasingly permeating linguistic activities in English textbooks. Furthermore, many listening tests for English certifications contain dialogues in various English accents, including Australian, South African and Indian English (Kramsch & Hua, 2016). This demonstrates that a foreign language cannot be taught effectively if its cultural influence is overlooked. It is commonly known that Italian students are often attracted by American culture, usually associated with the "American Dream", fascinating and endless trips "on the road" and the iconic figures of music and cinema[3]. At the same time, American students are attracted by Italian culture, characterized by the so-called "dolce vita" (a concept embodying a relaxed and leisurely lifestyle), in addition to being keen on Italian art, fashion and cuisine. The virtual exchange was primarily a cultural exchange, connecting students eager to explore and understand the culture of their partners.

Co-tutoring strategies

The activities that students were asked to carry out indirectly incorporated various learning strategies, ranging from cooperative learning, which is commonly used in educational contexts, to the so-called flipped classroom, implemented in a virtual setting. Following the principles of the flipped classroom, the coordinator communicated the topics of the next lesson in advance to help students to have a well-structured conversation, reduce pauses due to uncertainties, and avoid wasting time. Students thus had to find documents and materials on the assigned topic and prepare their speeches and comments at home. After this preliminary stage, students benefited from two important approaches. Cooperative learning, as a form of pair or group work, relies on ongoing collaboration between learners, leading them to support and tutor each other. In this stage, one of the two students was the teacher of the other. In particular, the Italian student acted as the Italian teacher during the first half of the meeting, when Italian was practised, and the roles were reversed during the second half when English was practised. In this process of mutual tutoring, students gleaned first-hand experience of scaffolding as they supported each other by using terms and expressions most relevant to the situation in a spontaneous manner. Although students were asked to prepare their topics, unexpected situations did arise,

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[3] In this regard, it is important to remember that many Italian families have relatives in the USA, descendants of the last century's emigration.

and the students often had to rely on linguistic resources not covered in their assignment. Scaffolding allows students to rely on their partners, who act as teachers or, more accurately, in this case, as tutor-colleagues. When scaffolding occurs with a peer of the same age, the emotional barrier is removed, making the conversation more spontaneous. Cooperative learning and scaffolding were followed by the process of languaging, characterised by interaction in L2 (Nicaise, 2022). After co-tutoring, students engaged in long conversations and co-constructed expressions and phrases pertaining to the topic which was being discussed. Considering that each student acted as the native-speaking teacher for half of the lesson, learners could discuss and negotiate specific meanings and expressions with their respective tutor-peers in L2. By repeating and paraphrasing terms and expressions, learners benefited from their tutors' corrections. After each meeting, students were asked to write down the new words and expressions in a notebook and practise them on their own, in order to facilitate their lexical appropriation.

Both Italian and American students involved in the project often included terms from their native languages in their conversations, using them to refer to specific untranslatable aspects of their respective cultures. This means that the Italian students, for example, occasionally resorted to Italian words and expressions during their conversations in English to depict certain habits, cultural events and local festivals, introducing some words from their mother tongue (sometimes untranslatable) into L2. The students who participated in the ITALengUSA project thus staged a multilingual and multicultural virtual context and, as a result, their communicative strategies expanded the aforementioned stage of languaging. In addition to interacting and co-constructing dialogues, they resorted to multilingual resources to portray cultural facts, implementing the translanguaging practice or translingual practice. In this regard, Kramsch and Hua (2016) claim that the interaction in a foreign language can include terms from L1 as well, as the speakers engaged in a dialogue in a foreign language are ideally located in a translingual territory, where linguistic resources from L1 and L2 interact, facilitating the exchange of intersemiotic information. According to linguists (Kramsch & Hua, 2016, p. 43), language teachers should teach their students "how to operate between languages in the form of 'translanguaging' […] or 'translingual practice' […] and other multilingual practices where English is combined with other languages", because "These multilingual practices correspond to multicultural worldviews that are indexed by the linguistic codes used at any given time". Considering that culture plays an important role in language learning and that the assigned topics covered cultural events and local traditions, the students involved in the ITALengUSA project experienced the translaguaging practice, using a variety of Italian and American English culture-bound terms. The Italian students, for example,

employed Italian words related to food, fashion, art and so on, such as "pasta" (and different terms used to dress pasta), "opera", "al dente", "parmigiana", "gelato", "vino", "trattoria" and even cinema-related expressions like "la vita è bella"[4]. At the same time, American students occasionally resorted to English terms when unable to use the Italian equivalents during their conversations with their Italian partners. Both American and Italian learners interacted by employing not only words and expressions in their target languages, as was required by the speaking activity, but also words and expressions in their source languages. In this regard, the translanguaging practice proved to be a valuable approach. When the English-speaking partner (partner 1) used a term in L1 because they were unable to use its equivalent in L2, they provided their Italian-speaking partner (partner 2) with lexical resources in L2, inviting partner 2 to co-construct the conversation, negotiating and formulating the specific meanings that partner 1 intended to express. As partner 2 listened to the word or the expression directly in L2, they were likely to contextualise and identify the target word or expression, guessing and repeating its meaning by using both their source language and their target language. Partner 1 thus learned the word or expression they were initially unable to translate, as it was repeated, reformulated and explained multiple times by both students in L1 and L2[5]. The students contributed to expressing and defining the different meanings of words and expressions by providing examples and making comparisons between Italian and English. This process also occurred in reverse, allowing both partners to co-construct their dialogues through the mutual cooperation generated by the translanguaging approach.

Results and discussion
Students' motivation and linguistic goals

In spite of the fact that some students, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, are likely to be eager to learn English to connect with the world, overlooking the cultural aspects of the language, the ITALengUSA programme has shown that both Italian and American students were keen on interacting with each other since they discussed different cultural aspects of their own countries. On the one hand, it appears that many students are pervaded by a non-ethnocentric attitude or, as Coonan (2011, p. 55) writes, an "international posture", as they enjoy interacting with foreign people in multicultural contexts, thus not pursuing the values of a specific cultural context. However, the experience which is analysed in this work represents a different case. It is widely known that American society is composed of

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[4] When pasta is cooked "al dente", it is not too soft when it is bitten, it is not overcooked.
[5] In this regard, see also Ellis' (1997) definition of interlanguage and Olson's (2023) study on the improvement of pronunciation in foreign language learning.

communities from different parts of the world and, as such, it is a multicultural society, shaped by various migration flows over time. Considering the multicultural context of American society, Italian students are motivated by the multiculturalism of the USA, as well as by the idea that learning English allows them to become part of that context. In this regard, Coonan (2011), discussing Dörnyei's (2009) theory about students' ideal selves in educational contexts, focuses on students' personal goals, specifically, the identity they aim to achieve and the motivation that leads them towards their ideal identities. According to Coonan (2011), language students' ideal selves are associated with a global community that encompasses various identities and cultural contexts. Students who learn a language aim to become proficient speakers, as Coonan explains (2011), from the perspective of the "international posture", as they are eager to interact in an international setting, characterised by different communities and identities. In this regard, American society is a clear example of a multicultural context which, in addition to its outstanding local icons and cultural symbols, incorporates the cultural expressions of various immigrant communities. Italian students' motivation for learning English is now influenced by the multicultural aspects of the American context. Italian students thus believe that English facilitates communication within the multicultural American society and, therefore, within a global society, as English is an essential tool for fulfilling different purposes. The motivation for studying English has transcended the national boundaries of single English-speaking countries and includes multicultural factors. In particular, the Italian students involved in ITALengUSA have claimed that their motivation for studying English is connected with the multicultural aspects of American society. Coonan's (2011) suggestion pertaining to the connection between students' ideal selves and the global community, represented, in this case, by the American context, does not apply to the American students of the ITALengUSA project. Their motivation for studying Italian is indeed more linked to a specific cultural context, along with their passion for Italian literature, art and history. Italian culture, like other national cultures worldwide, influenced the history of American society, owing to the high number of Italians who migrated overseas in the last two centuries. As a consequence, many Italian Americans are eager to discover more about their own roots. Many American students choose to study Italian to connect with their Italian relatives or to explore the cultural heritage of the "bel paese". Therefore, American students learn Italian for and through its culture, as much as for business reasons. Students' desire to know more about Americanness and Italianness stems from different approaches and perspectives, as the former is associated with multiculturalism and globalisation, whereas the latter is primarily explored

through its connections with the humanities. Returning to the concept of ideal self, the American and Italian students who participated in the project revealed different self-images. Italian students pursue a dynamic and interactive life within an ever-changing society, while American students are attracted by a slow way of life through the exploration of Italy's historical and cultural roots.

In light of the motivations that spurred Italian and American students to participate in the project and improve their language skills, it is now necessary to present and discuss data on the effectiveness of the project. Italian students were required to fill out a questionnaire before the start of the project, during the project and at the end of the project. The following table shows the questionnaire that students were tasked with completing prior to the beginning of the project. The following excerpts of reviews posted on the ITALengUSA website confirm these attitudes:

Table 5. A selection of the reviews on the ITALengUSA programme by Italian and American students

Ottima occasione per conoscere nuove culture e nuove persone e per migliorare lo speaking in inglese (A great opportunity to learn about different cultures, meet people, and to improve one's speaking skills in English).
I recommend this project to all the people who want to improve their English skills and to those who feel uncomfortable about speaking English.
By having the ability to build a connection with a fluent speaker in Italy, I was able to improve my confidence in speaking the language and learn further about contemporary Italian culture.
Parliamo ogni domenica e lei mi *aiutò* a praticare il mio italiano e a imparare la cultura italiana (my italics)[6].
The best thing about this fantastic project is that you can meet new friends, also learning and teaching at the same time.

The first two reviews, written by Italian students, highlight the opportunity they had to improve their speaking skills, an objective usually pursued by Italian students who learn English. The third and fourth reviews, written by American students, emphasise fascinating aspects of Italian culture. Moreover, it is interesting to notice that the student who wrote the last review expresses their enthusiasm for acting both as a learner and as a teacher, an opinion shared by other students as well.

The success of this project, which is due to continue the next academic year and involve new American and Italian educational institutions, was determined, among other things, by the lack of expenses for students, increasing their motivation and the sense of equality. As mentioned earlier, traditional exchange programs can be expensive for students,

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[6] This is an excerpt of a review written by an American student, who clearly made a mistake with "mi aiutò", instead of "mi aiuta". All the reviews listed in table 5 are from the ITALengUSA website (see references).

especially those involving countries outside the EU. Moreover, while Italian students are often fascinated by American culture for various reasons, economic factors frequently prevent them from traveling to the USA. This virtual mobility enabled them to interact with native speakers from the USA and provided them with equal opportunities to improve their language in an interactive way. The democratisation of virtual mobility programs fosters the values of the so-called UDL (Universal Design for Learning), a psycho-pedagogical approach whose principles are predicated on inclusion and flexibility, offering all students the opportunity to achieve the same educational goals (Novak & Tucker, 2021). The ITALengUSA programme is characterised, as previously explained, by pairs of students who co-tutor each other while discussing topics that the coordinators of the programme assign. This approach enhances inclusion, flexibility and diversity, three principles supported by the UDL, as the programme is based on educational activities that each student carries out with their peers. Psychological and physical barriers are removed and students travel together towards a common goal. The students of ITALengUSA interacted in a learning environment designed by technological devices and could practise their target languages in a democratic way, free from the influence of any educational gaps or psychological pressures (Sulis et al., 2024)[7]. As is well-known, teaching is a complex process that requires teachers to follow a specific and structured path, gradually leading students toward their objectives. Therefore, it is crucial to carefully consider the input provided to students and ensure that their previous knowledge and cultural background enable them to expand and develop further knowledge and skills (Krashen, 1982). This is vital for increasing their motivation. This programme tested students with new topics to verify their ability to interact spontaneously, although they were asked to prepare the discussions in advance. Consequently, the topics assigned during the programme did not require a gradual development of speaking skills. Instead, students were required to construct their conversations with their partners on the spur of the moment. The project did not aim to build students' skills step by step, as is typical in a traditional educational context, but encouraged them to discuss real-life situations with a native speaker. Students thus engaged in dialogues, interacting through sentence modifications, repetition, reformulation, mutual corrections, negotiating meaning, and using strategies and lexical constructions to improve communication[8]. Negotiation in conversation, a phase in which students collect their own knowledge and cooperate to expand it together, is crucial, as it "[…] leads learners to acquire the language forms which carry meaning,

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[7] As to the impact of technological devices in ELT, see Mosquera, 2017.
[8] As to language accuracy and fluency in second language learning, see Jochum-Critchley, 2024.

and language learning is about providing opportunities for interaction" (Nicaise, 2022, p. 120).

Conclusions

The present study has focused on the communication strategies that the students involved in ITALengUSA implemented during their experience. It has highlighted the advantages of co-tutoring, in which students act as both teachers and learners at the same time, experiencing an innovative learning environment that leads them to practise their L2 as if in real-life situations. The purpose of this work is to expand its scope of investigation, analysing various aspects of students' linguistic performances. ITALengUSA started a few years ago and has been evolving over time, including new agreements with various educational institutions in Italy and in the USA. Another aspect that could be explored is the analysis of the mistakes that students often make in their conversations, along with the development of possible strategies they could use to overcome communication problems. Considering this perspective, a comparative analysis of the two languages could be elicited from students, focusing on the most challenging structures and terms both in Italian and in English. The implementation of the virtual exchange programme described in this work has enhanced the potential benefits of remote teaching which, as is known, was already in use before the pandemic, but became more common during the health emergency. As ITALengUSA is a virtual exchange program, the next step that students are eager to take is to have the opportunity for a short stay in the USA and in Italy. If this opportunity should be offered, the programme would enable students to practise their L2 in both virtual and real environments.

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