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Young Learners' Uses of ELF: Moving Beyond the Classroom Walls

ABSTRACT:

This paper deals with data from a project carried out in three primary schools in Italy, which appear characterized by several ELF-related processes such as code-switching to signal cultural identity and pragmatic communicative strategies. Findings from a follow-up study with primary school English teachers as to the pedagogic implications of Englishes and ELF are also examined. Drawing from both studies, it will be discussed how international school partnerships can foster pedagogic approaches oriented at developing (intercultural) communication skills and effectively communicating through English as a lingua franca.

Introduction

For younger generations, the foreign language classroom is increasingly becoming one among the several settings where English is encountered. Contact with this 'global language' takes place daily through the media (TV, music, gaming), in the linguistic landscape, via tourism and international mobility, and even younger learners are likely to be familiar with ELF contexts out of first-hand experience, for example while on holiday or meeting tourists in their town. As in other European countries, participation in projects related to Life Long Learning Programmes (LLLP) has been growing at all levels of education also in Italy, with a significant presence of primary schools particularly in eTwinning¹. These internationally-oriented interactive spaces provide important opportunities for learners to effectively step into the role of ELF users and familiarize with ELF multilingual and multicultural contexts of language use.

Findings from a project carried out in three primary schools in Italy (Vettorel, 2010, 2013a) suggest that young learners are highly motivated to participate in such internationally-oriented contexts and to interact with peers of other linguacultures about their cultural and personal worlds. Both written and oral data from the project activities are characterized by

several ELF-related communication processes, such as code-switching to signal cultural identity, the creation of some non-standard lexical items, as well as effective pragmatic communicative strategies. What is more, a follow-up study with primary school English teachers (Vettorel, 2013b, 2015) shows that they are well aware of their students' extended contact with English and value international school partnerships as a cultural and linguistic 'window on the world'. Drawing on the data of both studies, this paper discusses how international school partnerships can foster pedagogic approaches to develop intercultural communication skills and offer opportunities for (young) learners to communicate through English in its *lingua franca* role.

1. The 'ELF & ICC' Project

The 'ELF & Intercultural Communicative Competence' project was developed over two school years (2009-2011) in three primary schools in the Verona area; two of the classes involved in the initial phases of the project also participated in internationally-oriented school activities, one with an eTwinning project, and the other further developing the letter-exchange with other European pupils undertaken the previous year, carrying out some web-conference sessions with Swedish and Spanish classes, too.

The first phase of the project was aimed at fostering awareness of the presence of English in the pupils' linguistic environment, of its spread and plurality, together with the *lingua franca* role it largely plays. Children were guided to reflect upon their experiences of communication in *lingua franca* contexts by mentioning several situations, from first-hand to family experience (e.g. at the seaside, on holiday, meeting tourists in their town, communicating with a sponsored child or with relatives living abroad), as [Figures 1](#) and [2](#) exemplify.

During the second part of the project, children were guided to discuss what they already knew about cultural representations related to the English-speaking world: the hypothesis – largely confirmed – was that, thanks to the increased opportunities offered by mobility and the media, they would be well familiar with many iconic aspects of the 'target culture' that are so often included in textbooks – just to mention a few, London and its monuments, the Royal Family, sports and traditions (Vettorel, 2010, 2008). It was thus deemed that Internationally-oriented school partnerships with peers living in other parts of Europe could constitute interesting opportunities to develop on the one hand Intercultural



Fig. 1 – Experiences of ELF



Fig. 2 – Family experiences of ELF

Communication (IC) skills, and on the other hand to use the language they were learning in realistic (ELF) contexts with participants of different linguacultures. Activities promoting communication were then developed through English as a shared lingua franca, with the concurrent aim of fostering ICC skills (Vettorel, 2010, 2013a).

Indeed, international partnerships are becoming part of educational experiences at all school levels (Maddalena, 2011; European Commission, 2012), particularly through and thanks to the support of the EU LLLP in its different actions, one of which is, since 2005, eTwinning. According to recent data, eTwinning involves more than 170,000 teachers and 33 countries (Crawley, 2013: 86; cf. also European Commission/LLLP, 2013) with about 122,637 enrolled schools and 63,140 teachers involved in projects as of June 1st, 2014². Projects on eTwinning can be managed wholly online, from identifying partners to setting up a project and carrying out communication among teachers, as well as pupils, in the dedicated virtual space; the project development phases and the final products can also be shared on the platform dedicated spaces. The eTwinning website is indeed community-oriented: as we read in the portal, it can be defined as «[t]he free and safe platform for teachers to connect, develop collaborative projects and share ideas in Europe» <<http://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/index.htm>> (last access 08.02.2016). It can thus be said to represent a particularly valuable tool to set up and manage an international project (Vettorel, forthcoming). The platform can be accessed in 26 languages, and English is most frequently employed as the in-common language of projects, often alongside other languages known by the participants (Ansan-Indire, 2010; Crawley, Gerhard *et al.*, 2010); given that English is widely taught since primary school all over Europe, the lingua franca role it plays in international school partnerships is hardly surprising.

And English was also the shared language of the European participants in the 'ELF & ICC' project; as mentioned, one school set up letter exchanges, as well as web-conferences, with previous Comenius partners and with other schools that were retrieved via the eTwinning platform; letters were exchanged in relation to Christmas traditions and trees, and, subsequently, through presentation letters with a Swedish class. The other class, instead, engaged in an eTwinning Project about legends with three schools from Poland, Latvia and Slovakia.

Records of all exchanges were kept by the teachers part of the Project team, who jointly planned the activities within a collaborative Action Research methodological framework (Vettorel, 2010). The dataset comprises about 23,500 words for written data (letters, e-mails), 540 for chat conversations and 2,150 words for web-conferences³.

2. ELF-oriented communication

Given the internationally-oriented nature of the activities, set within a communicative rather than a strictly school-task framework and involving participants of different linguacultures, an ELF-oriented and qualitative approach was undertaken for data analysis. The exchanges are characterised by several traits that are common to ELF findings in other contexts, from lexico-grammar to the use of code-switching to signal cultural identity (Vettorel, 2013a). The latter in particular will be taken into examination in the following sections, together with exemplifications of how these communicative exchanges were not hindered by linguistic 'deviances' (e.g. dropping the 3rd person -s morpheme in Simple Present verbs, or using a non-standard word order in questions), but rather characterised by pragmatic communicative strategies, particularly during the web-conferences.

2.1 Code-switching to express cultural elements

It has been shown that code-switching (CS henceforth) is naturally employed in ELF interactions to various functions (Cogo, 2011; Klimpfinger, 2007, 2009), among which signalling concepts and ideas related the participants' cultural worlds. This functional use of CS can be detected in the data at several levels, both in the exchanges referring to Christmas traditions – precisely in the ones dealing with trees typical of the area where the Italian and Spanish children live – and in the presentation letters to the Swedish partners by the Italian children.

Figure 3 below exemplifies the Christmas letters by Italian children: as can be noticed, elements typically related to Italian traditional Christmas food, such as panettone, zampone and pearà⁴ are expressed in Italian, albeit with a translation, which is not provided for pasta and lasagne; it can be inferred that, while the latter are internationally known, the need for some explanatory notes was felt for the other lexical items in order to make them comprehensible for children who, belonging to other cultures, may not be familiar with these culturally-loaded concepts.

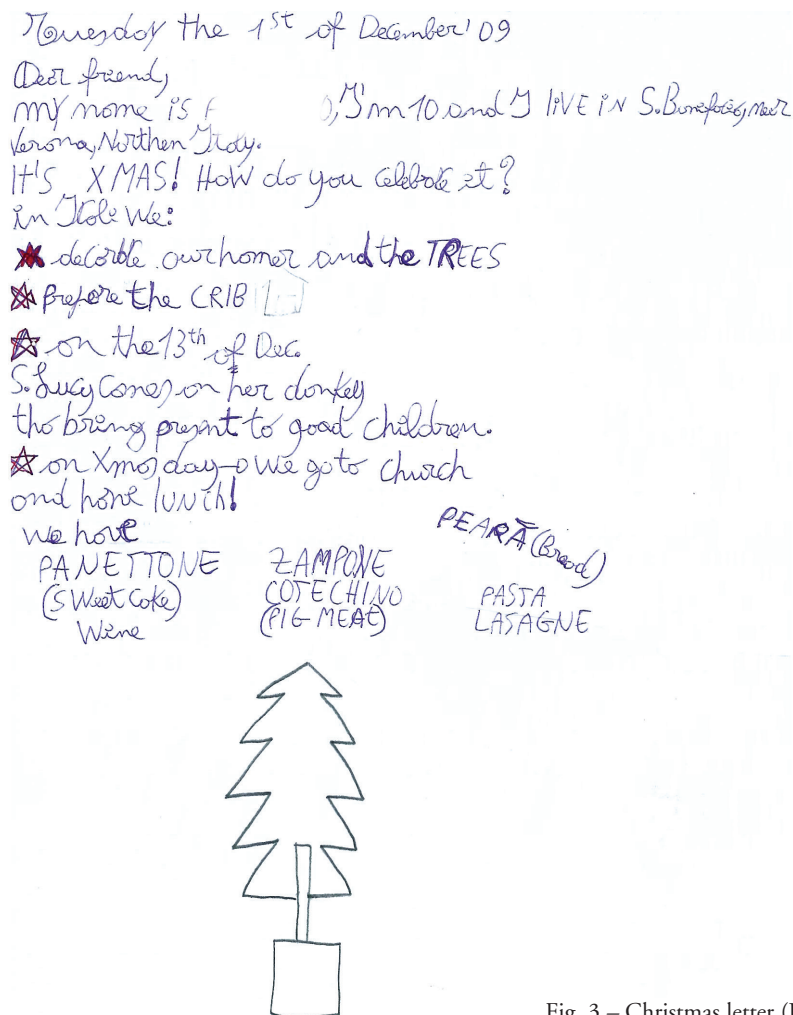


Fig. 3 – Christmas letter (Italian)

In many cases, visual glossing is also provided for culturally-loaded elements (Vettorel, 2013a); for instance, for local carols other elements such as a 'golden piglet' or the Christmas food 'carp' are both expressed in English and visually represented with a drawing in letters by Czech and Polish children. This is likely to have been done to signal their relevance and singularity to that culture, thus foregrounding their significance. Such multilingual instances are particularly frequent in the data, and in the

great majority of cases they are accompanied either by a brief translation, by an illustrative drawing, or by both.

Similar strategies can be found in the exchanges concerning the typical trees in the Spanish and Italian regions where the pupils live, as illustrated in Fig. 4 for Spanish children and Fig. 5 for Italian ones. As can be noticed, the main strategy employed by the Spanish pupils is glossing the code-switched elements with drawings, while Italian letters are often characterized both by translations and drawings (Fig. 5). Fig. 4 shows particularly clearly that elements peculiar to the area (platanos), as well as more general ones (flor, hoja de laurel) are frequently referred to in Spanish. In the case of cork, both the more general tree name (quejia, 'Quercus faginea') and the cork tree (aconorque, 'Quercus suber', Fig. 4), which is typical of the area, are referred to in Spanish, while the final product (cork) is provided in English and very frequently visually glossed.

In the above exemplifications, code-switching in the participants' L1 signals elements that are likely to have been perceived as typical of their cultural environment and linguacultural 'world'; at times, however, other languages are involved, too, especially in season's greetings, where the addressees' L1 is used, together with English and other languages (e.g.

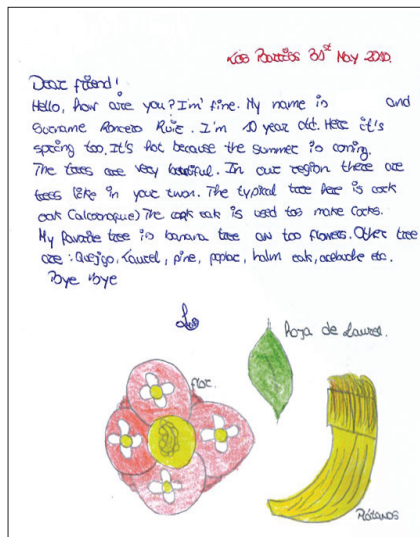


Fig. 4 – Trees (Spanish)

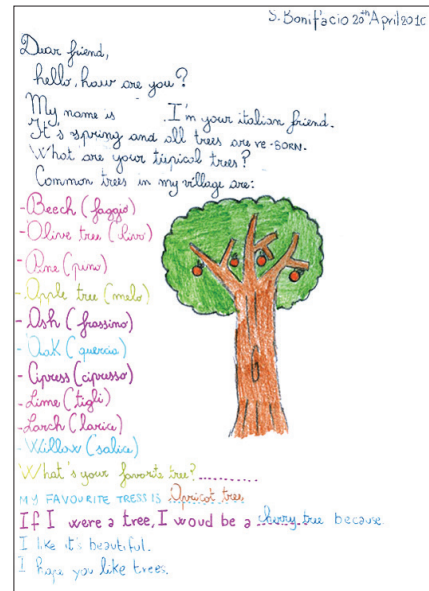


Fig. 5 – Trees (Italian)

French, Romanian, Greek). While on the one hand using the addressee's L1 can be seen as a sign of solidarity and rapport, the use of other LNs, even if in quite formulaic chunks, could be ascribed to a wish to acknowledge and mark the internationally-oriented and multilingual nature of these European exchanges.

Other instantiations connected both to the children's national identity and to their worlds in terms of personal interests can be noticed in [Fig. 6](#) and [Fig. 7](#), part of the letter exchange activity with Swedish partners.

These examples illustrate the children's strong wish to share with their partners elements of their world they deem significant and salient. They comprise food, both in its localized (as was seen for Christmas) and more global dimension (pizza, hamburger, chips, sweet marshmallows), hobbies (football, basketball), as well as aspects related to their national identity. The latter is represented in these examples by the Italian flag; in several other cases the messages contain also a reference to the President of Italy (e.g. The President of Italy is Giorgio Napolitano), or visual representations of Italy as a boot, as it is often referred to in Italian ('stivale') due to its shape. Code-switching seems once more to be employed to signal the participants' affiliation to their cultural worlds; at the same time, visual and/or linguistic cues are provided to support intelligibility – in line with ELF findings in other contexts (cf. e.g. Klimpfinger, 2007, 2009; Cogo, 2011). These code-switched elements can be seen as instantiations of how multilingualism (rather than monolingualism) is an integral part of communicative practices in ELF settings, where bilinguals draw upon all their linguistic repertoires as legitimate L2 users (Cook, 2002, 2007) to express their intended meanings accordingly. In this perspective, rather than (negative) transfer, the interrelation between L1 and L2 can be seen as «bidirectional», drawing «on all kinds of resources (skills, knowledge and strategies) available to learners» (Nikolov, Mihaljevic Djigunovic, 2011: 100), within a multicompetence rather than a deficit, 'non-nativeness' framework (e.g. Pavlenko, Norton, 2007: 676; cf. also Jenkins, 2006) and the communicative aim to partake personal and linguacultural affiliations.

Indeed, these exchanges represented important opportunities to learn about cultural aspects of their peers living in other European countries. As will be seen below, the linguistic 'deviances' (when present) did not prevent effective communication among the children, who enthusiastically participated and were highly involved in the activities, both cognitively and emotionally. Rather than book-based knowledge, they could learn from their European partners elements of similarity and difference. This provided also the opportunity to reflect both on their own culture (especially as to

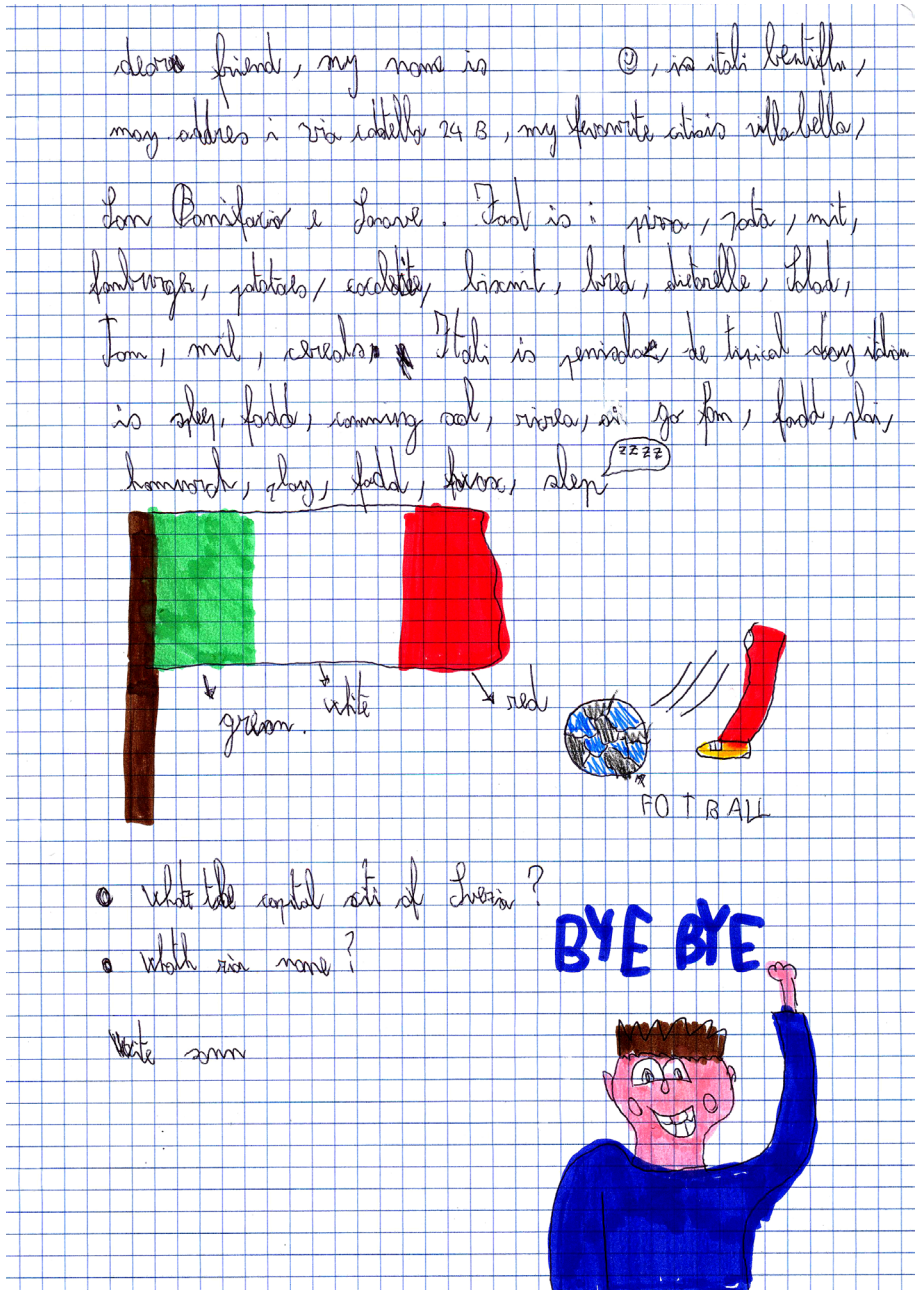


Fig. 6 – Letters to Sweden (Italian)

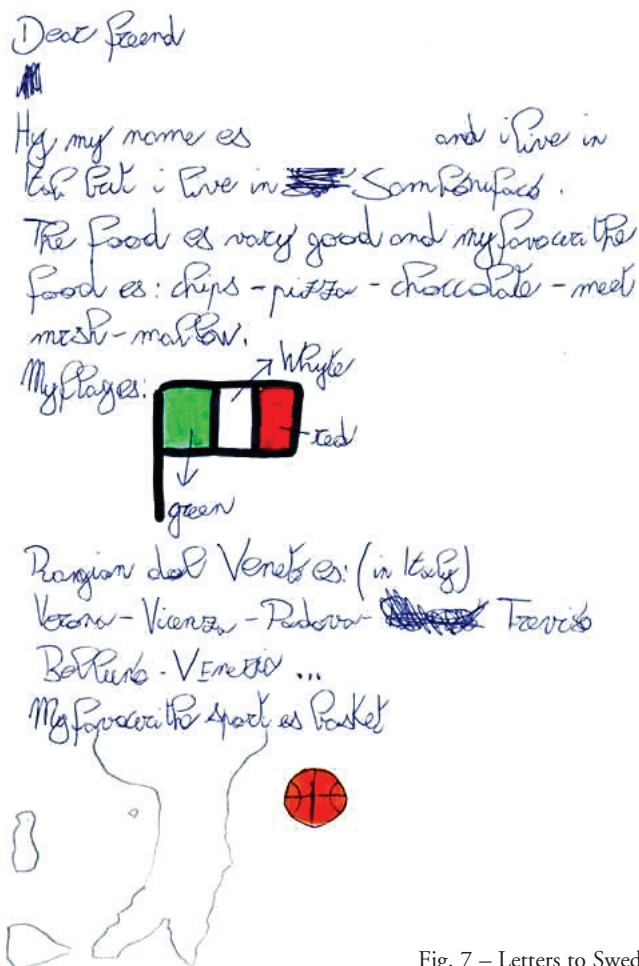


Fig. 7 – Letters to Sweden (Italian)

the elements of similarity), and to foster attitudes of curiosity and respect towards ‘otherness’, relativising knowledge and attitudes (cf. Byram, 1997, 2008). Data from the Teacher’s Diary in relation to the ‘Christmas around Europe’ activities show that both similarities and differences were well highlighted in the final reflection activity: preparations for Christmas

(e.g. Christmas trees), religious traditions, singing carols and exchanging presents are largely shared elements. Food, on the other hand, is much more localised, as well as rituals for Christmas dinner / lunch and good luck wishes on New Years' Eve. The project activities represented thus an opportunity for the development of intercultural awareness and sensitivity, as well as reflection on the learners' C1, not least in the description of traits of their culture(s) to their partners. The contribution given by the children of non-Italian origin was also fundamental in approaching otherness, fostering a broader and more inclusive perspective in classroom practices (as it had happened for Outer Circle Englishes in the activities related to awareness of World Englishes, cf. Vettorel, 2010). The fact that English was the *lingua franca* of these exchanges made communication possible; however, it did not work as a homogenising language, but it rather allowed cultural similarities and differences to emerge and to be shared in their own specificities.

2.2 Negotiating personal worlds – pragmatic features in oral data

The same wish to exchange ideas about personal worlds can be detected in the oral data from the web-conference between Italian and Spanish children. The desire to communicate with their partners is well perceivable: all pupils consistently asked to take the floor and actively cooperated, supporting communication by providing translation of words into Italian, advice on lexical items or in-common references, or suggesting appropriate strategies, such as repetition or requests for clarification.

The topics the children dealt with are mainly related to their interests (school subjects and activities, music, sports); some more communicatively challenging subjects were tackled too, such as the funfair coming up in the Spanish children's town, and the class trips respectively to Madrid and Venice. The sound quality in the web-conference was frequently disturbed, and, despite the video helping in supporting interaction by making it closer to face-to-face conversation, utterances were not always fully intelligible, making the task even more demanding.

As the following extract exemplifies, pragmatic communicative features appear to be well present even in such a small-sized corpus. Same-speaker repetition, which in ELF talk secures recipient's understanding in case of misinterpretation (e.g. Kaur, 2009), emerges as a main strategy all throughout the oral data, as shown in the following extract⁵:

Extract 1

103 T it: what's your who's your favourite singer?

104 T sp: <un> xxx</un>
105 S1 sp: what's that? <un> xx </un>
106 T it: your favourite singer?
107 T sp: <un> xx </un>
[...]
129 S1 it: who
130 T it: music repeat MUSIC MUSIC do you like (.)?
131 STS sp: <un> xx </un>
132 Sx it: <whispering> do you like </whispering>
133 S1 it: what is your favourite singer?
134 S1 sp: repeat please
135 T it: <loud>SINGER SINGER (.) WHAT GROUP?</loud>
136 S1 sp: ah
137 T it: he (.) eh eh eh @
138 T/STS sp: <un> xx </un> <6><un> xx </un></6>
139 S1 it: <in exasperation> <6>what is your favourite singer?</6>
140 STS it: @@@
141 T it: do you like rihanna do you like er
142 S1 it: <7>Do you like rihanna? katy perry</7>
143 T/STS sp: <7><un> xx </un></7> <un> xx </un>
144 S1 sp: jennifer lo (.)jennifer lopez
145 T it: <whispering> jennifer lopez </whispering>
146 T it: ok<8> ok<8> @ jennifer lopez ok M.S. @
147 S1 it: <8>ok<8>

In the previous turns the children had tried to deal with the topic of their favourite singer, with direct requests for repetition going on for several turns, as exemplified in line 134, where the imperative repeat is mitigated by please and linguistically 'geared' to the children's level of proficiency in English. The original question is then repeated once more in line 135 by the Italian teacher through a specification strategy, and then in an exasperated tone by the child holding the floor (line 139). This is followed by a burst of laughter by the other children that can be interpreted as support to the strategy adopted by their mate. The teacher provides an exemplification (line 141), which is promptly taken up by the child holding the floor, who adds the name of another singer (142). An answer is then given by the Spanish child (144), and confirmation of meaning finally takes place at line 145 for which the Italian teacher and student then signals comprehension (line 146, 147).

Among the several possible strategies to clarify meaning (exemplification,

definition, description, comparison, contrast, cf. e.g. Kaur, 2009: Chapter 6), exemplification is the most frequent in the data, and it is often prompted by the teachers with hyponyms or hypernyms, as in line 135 above. Given the still developing competence in English of the children, support by the respective teachers was granted all along the 13'33" length of the web-conference. Nevertheless, as these examples show, the teachers acted as a model for the use of cooperative strategies to support communication, providing examples of successful (ELF) strategies. Despite the difficulties, related also to the aforementioned sound quality problems, meaning was in most cases carried across successfully.

2.3 Communicating via chat

Other instantiations of personal successful communication revolving around the children's interests can be seen in the eTwinning project email exchanges and chat conversation exemplified in Extract 2 below, that is part of the chat communication via eTwinning:

Extract 2

- V. (Italy) hello A. how are you?
- A. (Slovakia) Okay
- V. I' dont understand: are you good or bad
- A. I am good. What time table did ju have today
- A. what subject is your favorite
- V. this morning italian and maths, now inglish. I like
italian, maths and inglish
- A. are you here
- A. my favorite subject is matsh
- A. Maths
- V. i like me
- A. I go play basketball. and you

- V. I no
- A. do you have sister or brother
- V. yes, one sister
- A. I like pink what colour do you like
- V. My Favourite colour is orange
- A. I like horses and doks
- V. I like dogs, cats and canary
- A. xhave old are you
- A. have
- V. My favourite sport is swimming and volley ball
- V. sorry we have to go
- V. Bye
- V. Ok

In Extract 2 V. (Italian) and A. (Slovakian) ask each other several questions mainly related to school, their favourite school subjects and colours. In this – as in other cases (cf. Vettorel, 2013a; forthcoming) – the linguistic elements that would be considered as ‘deviant’ in ENL (e.g. ‘no’ rather than ‘I don’t’, lack of pluralization in nouns, verbs in the singular form, cf. e.g. Seidlhofer, 2011), do not appear to hinder interaction, nor to create miscommunication. Participants use and stretch the linguistic resources at their disposal to interact with each other, communicating about themselves and their world. Considering their age and level of proficiency (the exit level for primary school in Italy is set to A1 CEFR level), they appear to effectively carry across their intended meaning, and their communicative acts are oriented at getting to know each other, with genuinely communicatively oriented aims (Seidlhofer, 2011).

International exchanges, even at a primary school level, can thus constitute salient opportunities for learners to experience real and meaningful contexts of language use. The young participants in this study showed high levels of motivation and engagement all throughout the project activities, actively experimenting with the language to communicate and to learn about their mates' personal, local/national and cultural environment, exploiting the language they learnt – and were learning – to express themselves. These experiences provided them with the opportunity to step into the role of ELF users in settings that 'opened up' the classroom walls, projecting language use into real contexts, allowing them to stretch their bi- and plurilingual resources to effectively interact with peers of different linguacultures.

3. International partnerships: using the language – primary teachers' perceptions

The follow-up phase of the research study was aimed at investigating primary teachers' perceptions of international exchanges as opportunities to foster the development of language and intercultural skills. Informants were experienced teachers, who agreed to participate in a questionnaire survey⁶; individual interviews were then carried out with 5 of the Italian teachers who had completed the questionnaire, and a focus group was held during a Comenius team meeting in one of the schools that had taken part in the 'ELF & ICC' Project, with mixed-nationality participants⁷. The aim of the interviews and of the focus group was to allow a deeper exploration of the topics included in the questionnaire⁸; this paper will deal with a qualitative analysis of findings related to international school partnerships.

Findings from the questionnaire survey show that, according to most respondents, international exchanges represent important occasions to acquaint pupils with intercultural communicative contexts, where ELF represents a shared code. The first column in [Chart 1](#) summarizes general findings and the first column in [Chart 2](#) the ones related to Primary school. As can be noticed, although exchanges are rated higher on the Lickert scale in [Chart 2](#) (1 = very important, 6= not important), on the whole results are similarly located on the positive end of the scale.

Teachers were also asked to express their opinion as to the relevance of international exchanges to improve listening, speaking, communication and intercultural skills; as columns 2-4 in both charts illustrate, results appear similar in this respect too, although with some differences in distribution on the 1-3 positive end of the scale. The same positive opinions can be found for most skills, in this case with slightly higher values on the negative end

of the scale. On the whole, however, international exchanges are positively valued, particularly as far as the development of communication and IC skills is concerned.

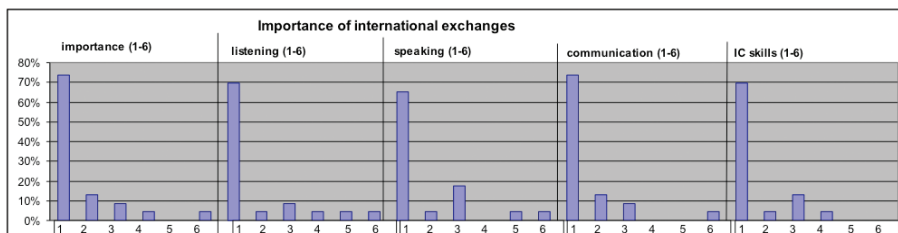


Chart 1 – How important are international exchanges in language teaching and learning to promote... (N=23)

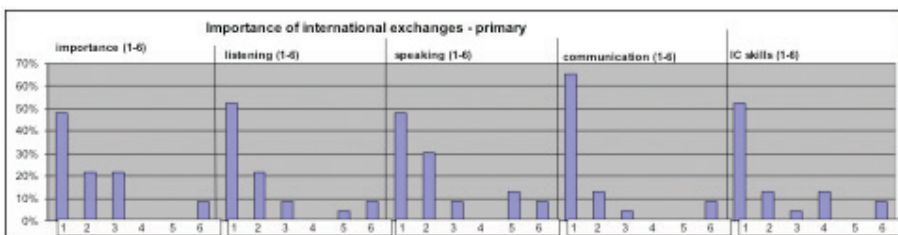


Chart 2 – How important are international exchanges in language teaching and learning in primary schools to promote... (N=23)

During the interviews and the Focus Group, teachers emphasised that in these internationally-oriented activities young learners show a high level of involvement and motivation, and are very curious to learn about their peers' life through these first-hand experiences, rather than from their teachers or their textbook only. In the words of a teacher, «they exchanged ideas on different aspects of their daily routine, rules in their school, they came to observe different elements, both writing and receiving the letters from their peers, so they learnt new things about other children living in a different environment. This was very positive, together with the fact that they were really waiting for their partners' letters to arrive...» (T7, interview). Indeed, the pupils' high affective and cognitive involvement, which allows them to take advantage of this 'window on the outside world' is a frequent trait in the 'ELF & ICC' project activities (Vettorel, 2010, 2013a), as well as in similarly oriented experiences (e.g. Crawley, Gerhard *et al.*, 2010; Crawley, Gilleran *et al.*, 2010). Although international exchanges can in principle be said to be part of educational activities, they

reach beyond the classroom walls, and can hence be seen as «the very first step to change and to intercultural communication; even if it is a window on another school, it is anyway a window» (T4, interview). This view is shared by many respondents, and clearly emerged as a positive asset both in the interviews and during the Focus Group discussion.

Motivation, enrichment, empowerment, open-mindedness and the development of communication strategies were the key-words chosen by my informants to define participation in international school partnerships, not least with reference to how the language that is being learnt is put to use in realistic communicative contexts. As one teacher pointed out, these are «very different from dialogues that can be carried out in the classroom, it was a way to communicate about something real» (T7, interview). During the interviews, four teachers highlighted that young children need to be guided in communication activities in such contexts – particularly in writing – given that in primary school the focus is mainly on the development of oral skills; as one teacher words it, «they wanted to describe things for which they did not have the language skills yet, so the letters had to be limited to some topics, and of course guided» (T7, interview). Nevertheless, no matter how challenging these experiences may be, particularly for young learners, using the language in such realistic communicative settings «allows you to go beyond your comfort zone, to take risks, to try out your skills, to improve them too in communication» (T4, interview).

Furthermore, internationally-oriented school exchanges can also contribute to familiarize learners with different varieties of English and ELF in realistic contexts of use. As one teacher pointed out with reference to her experience:

the main thing is that they tried their understanding and listening skills. You know, when they are at school they are exposed to a very small variety of language – they listen to me, to the tape, and I try to make them listen to some video, also on the internet, as I have a smart-board in class – which is very helpful. But everything is small, protected, not – so to say – authentic. Through these experiences, on the one hand they learnt that there are different settings of language use in terms of listening and understanding – which was a very important thing for them to understand. Secondly, they tried to use the language in real contexts; they are used to learn functions and memorize questions, answers, vocabulary – bits of language in chunks, but they don't use it really, so they had to find out strategies to use what they knew to communicate in a real context. These were the two most important things they learnt from this experience (T3, interview).

To sum up, these findings seem to suggest that the primary school EFL teachers in my sample see international school exchanges as an important and significant way to stretch occasions for language use, to create contact with people belonging to other cultures and to provide pupils with «more opportunities» (T3, Focus Group). Most respondents also reckon that these experiences can improve listening, speaking and above all communication and IC skills. This suggests that opportunities to use English in lingua franca contexts – such as in internationally-oriented school exchanges – are indeed positively valued.

Similarly to my informants, European teachers who have taken part in eTwinning projects highlight increased motivation and improvement of personal interrelationships among students (Crawley *et al.*, 2009: 27). Their active participation and interest in using foreign languages (FL henceforth) as a means of communication with their partners, as well as the development of intercultural communication skills (cf. interviews in Colaiuda, 2010; Crawley, Gerhard *et al.*, 2010; Tosoratti, 2010; Wastiau *et al.*, 2011) are also underscored. Indeed, out-of-school opportunities of contact with the FL (e.g. the media, the linguistic landscape, holidays, meeting tourists) can support motivation (ELLiE Second Interim Report, 2009; Enever, 2011a, 2011b), not least in intercultural terms (Cziser, Kormos, 2009). As the ELLiE longitudinal research has highlighted (Enever, 2011b), a positive impact on language learning activities can also be correlated to an internationally-oriented outlook by schools, either as engaged in partnerships with other classes or as open to foreign visitors and activities involving the foreign language. As Enever (2011a: 148) points out, «the networking opportunities provided by the European Comenius framework have been of great benefit, particularly where also supported by national/regional ministry initiatives». A positive impact on the children's FL skills, as well as on knowledge and attitudes, are also largely stressed in a recent study on the benefits of eTwinning (European Commission/LLLP, 2013). International school partnerships constitute thus opportunities to use the FL in meaningful contexts with peers of different linguacultures, favourably expanding their language learning experience (Enever, 2011a; Lopriore, Krikhaar, 2011; Lopriore, Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011), with positive effects not only on motivation but also on successful learning (e.g. Lopriore, 2012). These international cooperation projects can foster connections between language learning and language use, and prepare today's learners to the (future) communicative settings they will most likely be involved in, where English is largely employed as an international and intercultural means of cooperation,

most often with other non-native speakers. Significantly, as we have seen, participants in the 'ELF & ICC' project showed familiarity with contexts where English works as a lingua franca, as well as great openness and interest in cross-cultural communication with their European peers, whether native and/or non-native. A parallel could be drawn in this respect with findings in Nikolov (1999), where Hungarian and Croatian learners did not relate English with its NS community and, in a similar study (Nikolov, 1996), where about 46% of 13-14 year-old respondents emphasized «the role of English as the means of international communication» (Nikolov, 1999: 48) – thus testifying to a growing awareness of its de-nationalized vehicular function in cross-cultural contexts.

Occasions for intercultural contacts can thus naturally complement formal FL instruction, familiarizing learners with communication in increasingly multicultural and multilingual communicative settings, with a positive impact both on motivation and on language competence (Enever, 2011a; Csizér, Kormos, 2009).

4. Conclusions

As we have attempted to show, internationally-oriented school partnerships can have a positive valence on several grounds. Besides fostering the development of Intercultural Communication skills, they can promote and support learners' self-confidence in using the FL within real communicative settings, allowing them to share their worlds with peers of different linguacultures through ELF as a common code.

Most importantly, understanding out of first-hand experiences that the language can be used in such contexts to communicate with 'real' people can also positively affect motivation, helping learners to perceive the FL not merely as a school subject but as a life skill (Nikolov, Mihaljevic Djigunovic, 2006: 241). Furthermore, international school partnerships can familiarize students with ELF communicative contexts, fostering awareness of the importance of communication strategies in order to make understanding and effective interaction possible, particularly when interlocutors belong to different linguacultures; in these contexts, learners are provided with opportunities for «*linguaging*» (Seidlhofer, 2011), that is, to «*stretch their communicative capability and use their multilingual and multicultural competence to communicate*» (Lopriore, 2013a; 2015).

Findings from this research study suggest that code-switching has been employed to express culturally-related concepts connected to the

participants' identity – whether cultural, national or part of their personal worlds. As we have seen, code-switches are in the majority of cases accompanied by strategies suited to international and intercultural communicative settings, such as translations, visual glossing or explanatory strategies, showing awareness of the specificities of communication taking place with partners of different linguacultures. In oral data particularly, pragmatic strategies have been deployed to reach effective communication, which is the main, genuine aim of these participants, as perceptible all throughout the internationally-oriented phases of the project.

Teachers, both in general and in my findings, have very positive attitudes towards international school partnerships, which are seen as opportunities to develop intercultural, communicative and language skills. They generally believe that these activities can constitute 'windows on the world', complementary to 'school learning' in terms of language use as well as intercultural contact and awareness. This openness is certainly a valuable point for a possible change in perspective towards the inclusion of internationally-oriented (ELF) communication in language teaching and learning practices, together with familiarizing teachers with ELF and ELF-related pedagogical implications. Supporting teachers' self-confidence in the promotion of language use «without (the) fear of conforming to a standard» (Lopriore, 2013) may also foster a shift in perspective in their teaching practices, taking into account the importance of communication (strategies) rather than a primarily norm-oriented approach, particularly in the diverse settings where English works as a *lingua franca*.

Taking part in experiences like the 'ELF & ICC' project, or similar types of internationally-oriented activities, could also foster attitudes of curiosity and openness to diversity through interpersonal contact, rather than through a textbook – learning to talk about one's own experiences and cultural worlds, and to appreciate those of peers living in different contexts in a foreign language; an Anglophone perspective, which is still given prominence in teaching materials, would thus become one among several viewpoints. As importantly, such a perspective could also work as a significant backdrop in our increasingly multilingual and multicultural classes, actively acknowledging the experiences of learners who come from different realities and cultures in a reflective and inclusive way. Experiences like the ones we have illustrated in this paper could, in my opinion, also provide opportunities to 'localize' the language classroom syllabus, taking into account the learners' interests and personal worlds, possibly supporting localized and learner-centred methodological approaches too, both from a cultural and linguistic point of view. Furthermore, in the students'

perceptions English would not be confined to a school subject – like many others – or a generic skill (Graddol, 2006; Enever, Moon, 2009), separated from real encounters ‘from below’, but experienced as an attainable (in linguistic terms), true communicative tool to connect with the world.

¹ The eTwinning project was created in 2005 under the European Union's e-Learning scheme, and is now integral part of Erasmus+. It aims at promoting European cooperation among schools, teachers and students; as we read on the dedicated website, “[t]he eTwinning action promotes school collaboration in Europe through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) by providing support, tools and services for schools” <http://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/discover/what_is_etwinning.htm> (last access 06.02.2015).

² Source: <http://www.etwinning.net/it/pub/news/press_corner/statistics.cfm> (last access 05.06.2014), statistics continuously updated; in June 2013 enrolled schools were 106,000.

³ The corpus includes data for which consent was granted.

⁴ Pearà is a typically Veneto sauce, particularly in the Verona area; it is prepared with grated bread, meat broth and other ingredients, and served with boiled meat.

⁵ The L1 of the speakers has been reported in the extracts in each speaker's turn (e.g. S1 it), for both students and teachers (T it, T sp). When a speaker not holding the floor intervenes, it has been indicated as Sx, and when all speakers are talking together as SS. Transcription conventions are based on VOICE Transcription Conventions [2.1] <http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/page/transcription_general_information> (last access 15.04.2013); bold has been added for relevant examples.

⁶ N=23, all Italian apart from the six teachers who had taken part in the project activities described above, 1 Spanish, 2 Danish, 1 Latvian, 1 Polish, 1 Czech.

⁷ 2 Italian, 2 Danish, 2 Spanish and 2 NS teachers from Northern Ireland.

⁸ The areas investigated included: personal and professional relations with English, opinions about their pupils' present and future contact with English, openness to the inclusion of different varieties of English in classroom practices, added value of international school partnerships, understanding of ELF and opinions on the acceptability of ELF features in pupils' productions; cf. Vettorel, 2013b.

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