Lingue e Linguaggi
Lingue Linguaggi 38 (2020), 387-406
ISSN 2239-0367, e-ISSN 2239-0359
DOI 10.1285/i22390359v38p387
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A STUDY OF COGNITIVE-EXPERIENTIAL PRACTICES FOR PROMOTING ELF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN ITALIAN ELT CLASSROOMS

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Abstract – The increasing use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) calls for substantial changes in the English Language Teaching (ELT) pedagogy both in Italy and elsewhere. This chapter illustrates an ongoing research project aimed to explore the dynamics of ELF discourse in the educational domain, and ultimately, to devise guidelines for developing cognitive-experiential practices that enhance ELF communicative competence in ELT classrooms. The study investigates ELF communicative strategies through naturally occurring discussions in which school-age learners – ELF users – talk about a challenging topic under unconstrained conditions, namely without the supervision of their English teacher and without English as a Native Language (ENL) requirements. This experimental activity was performed by observing and audio recording natural spoken ELF interactions among Italian students and students of ten different nationalities participating in intercultural exchange programmes in three upper-secondary schools. The qualitative data analysis is conducted within a conversation analytic framework by means of a protocol based on conversational moves. It focuses on the cooperative practices that school-age ELF users enact to achieve effective communication. The analysis reveals that participants (i) generally orient to their interlocutors, employing pragmatic strategies that are commonly used in ELF communication, and (ii) implement *languaging* and interactional skills that show their authentic involvement in the spoken activity as it was designed. These findings demonstrate that school-age ELF users put into play their language resources, but also themselves as individuals with their own identity, cultural background and experiences. The results of this study may be translated into teaching practices that enhance ELF-mediated communication, promoting language and intercultural awareness.

Keywords: ELF; ELF communicative competence; ELT classrooms; school-age ELF users; upper-secondary school.

1. Introduction

What will the English syllabus in Italian schools be like in the 21st century? The school landscape, with its multicultural and multilingual classrooms, has changed drastically over the past few decades, but very little has changed in the English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms in Italy. As English has become crucial for intercultural communication in our globalized world, the emerging use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) – i.e. the English used by

speakers of different first languages (L1) and cultures in diverse sociocultural communicative contexts – should redesign the ELT scenario, normally played out by English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The average Italian student is bound to use the English learnt at school in manifold communicative situations, not only with native speakers of English, but more frequently with an ever-increasing number of non-native speakers. Hence, the acquisition of ELF communicative competence, defined in cognitive-experiential terms as the ability to accommodate and negotiate culture-bound meanings between different ELF variations in contact, has become urgent in Italian schools.

While the structure of our society has become 'liquid' (Bauman 2000, 2005), and even though life skills such as learning how to learn and communication (in L1 and L2) have become pivotal to cope with the challenges of our time, the teaching of the English language – at least in Italian schools – is still ossified, and keeps resting on the well-established 'scripts' that are validated by EFL institutional bodies. In this language teaching landscape school-age learners are taught and trained to take examinations that gauge their competence against native speaker (NS) regulative norms of usage and use, while their real (current and future) needs for effective communication in an intercultural environment is largely overlooked. The majority of our multilingual learners, the so-called 'digital natives', have been exposed to English outside the classroom since they were children, mostly via the Internet; as a result, their perception of English is that of a language with a global function (Sifakis 2018). Thereby it is crucial for learners to be confronted with the plurality of English and to be guided to become effective language users.

The multidimensional communicative competence that EFL teachers try hard to enhance in their classrooms, at least in Italy, does not yet acknowledge the natural phenomenon of English as a lingua franca. Acknowledging ELF in the ELT classroom means to become aware of how intercultural communication works, and hence to delve into the pragmatic, adaptive strategies that enable speakers to get their message across in an intelligible and efficient way. An ELF-informed pedagogy requires teachers to be less norm-oriented, more flexible, and more proactive towards tasks and practices that turn learners into actual users of the language and satisfied protagonists of their learning (Kohn 2018).

This study is an exploration into the use of ELF in the educational domain; it is based on naturally occurring discussions in which small groups of school-age learners from a diverse range of first language backgrounds talk about a challenging topic and work out a mutual agreement in a 'teacher-free zone'. Its main purpose is to investigate the cognitive and communicative processes activated by students in accommodating and negotiating meanings through ELF variations that reflect their own different

native linguacultural schemata. To this end, I designed a task that enables students to interact under unconstrained conditions, that is to say, (i) without the supervision of their English teacher, and (ii) without having to follow a standard classroom protocol of turn-taking and lexicogrammatical correctness, generally enforced in teacher-learner activities.

I grounded my ethnographic study in a Conversation Analysis (CA) framework, enquiring into the dynamics of the discourse without preconceived categories, and focusing upon the moves and the strategies speakers use to make meaning converging with (or diverging from) their interlocutors. I explored (i) the conversational moves that frame interactions among multilingual and multicultural speakers, and (ii) the meaning-making and accommodation strategies that ELF speakers employ to achieve effective communication.

This chapter reports preliminary results on the dynamics of spoken ELF interactions amongst Italian students and students of different linguacultures participating in ongoing intercultural exchange programmes.

2. Theoretical framework

ELF is a global phenomenon that is still brushed aside in the English Language Teaching landscape, in Italy as much as elsewhere. I agree with Seidlhofer (2011, p. 190) when she argues that "[it] seems to be not so much a deliberate act, but rather a general lack of awareness". Most ELT teachers are simply not aware of the emerging reality of ELF as a worldwide medium of intercultural communication; and even if they are, they believe it should stay away from their classrooms – so as not to interfere with their well-established teaching routine and not to threaten their professional comfort zone.

The English taught at school, EFL, is the English that conforms to the rules of use and usage of the native speaker, either British or American. In the traditional ELT classroom learners are required to make appropriate choices according to the English as a native language (ENL) paradigm; any alternative linguistic realizations are considered incorrect, "formally 'defective'" (Seidlhofer 2011, p. 197), no matter how communicatively successful they are. Defective from an EFL perspective, perhaps, but certainly not from an ELF perspective, as long as the linguistic forms motivated by pragmatic function make communication flow in an intelligible and effective way. An ELF-oriented pedagogy requires a reconceptualization of English as a subject. The ELT classroom is imbued with ideologies of native-speakerism (Jenkins 2012; Seidlhofer 2011), correctness and appropriateness that ignore the multilingual repertoires of the learners, who speak one or more languages in addition to English. As Guido (2008, p. 21)

maintains, "[t]aken for granted [...] is the idea that the grammar code of Standard English – and, implicitly, also native-English pragmatic behaviours – are shared norms in intercultural transactions across the world". Whatever piece of language is taught, it is bound to conform to the rules of usage and use and to the idioms of the native speaker. Learners are expected to adhere to such norms: not only do they have to learn the rules, but they also have to apply them in a correct and appropriate way, following the native speaker's practice (Widdowson 2012, 2015a).

As ELF discourse develops in emergent contexts characterised by "a high degree of linguacultural diversity, routinely resulting in highly variable, and creative use of linguistic resources" (Dewey 2012, p. 163), norm-driven parameters can no longer gauge the effectiveness of ELF communication. Dewey (2012) suggests the adoption of an ELF perspective that encompasses a post-normative orientation to language teaching and learning. Such an approach entails a shift in focus: no longer on the correct linguistic realizations in Standard English, but rather on the communicative effectiveness, to be achieved through a "dynamic and adaptive use of language resources" (Dewey 2012, p. 142).

Most often learners fail to fulfil native speaker norms because their linguistic output is grounded on the experience of their own language. Learners use the language creatively, stretching their linguistic repertoire so as to achieve intelligible and effective communication. But it is exactly this behaviour that is blamed by most teachers, who evaluate students against NS norms under the aegis of the publishing industry and English language assessment boards, acting on the organization of English as a subject. EFL teachers are focused on what they teach; hence they evaluate "*teachees*" (Widdowson 2015b, p. 371, emphasis in original), not learners. In an ELF-oriented pedagogy, instead, teachers focus on who they are teaching to and on the learning process. Teachers' attention should shift from the amount of correct language that learners display to the process of *languaging*, that is to how learners use the language (Seidlhofer 2011). *Languaging*, according to Swain (2006, p. 98), refers to "the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language." In other words, it is "having a go, trying to make sense and getting somewhere against all the odds" (Phipps 2007, p. 1). The dynamic process of *languaging* naturally turns learners into users who exploit what Widdowson (2003, p. 173) calls 'virtual language', namely "the potential inherent in the language for innovation". The learners-users activate their capability for using their linguistic resources – regardless of whether their linguistic realizations do or do not conform to the native speaker encodings. Thus, to investigate ELF means to delve into the dynamics of language learning and into the strategies of communication.

The emerging use of ELF also requires a reconceptualization of

communicative competence which casts light on the intercultural dimension of communication, namely on the relationship between language and ever-changing sociocultural contexts. The view that both language and culture are fluid and dynamic resources in intercultural communicative events suggests that "there is no clear 'target culture' to which English can be assigned" (Baker 2011, p. 200); hence, it implies that ELF users negotiate meaning in invariably diverse and emergent sociocultural contexts. The kind of communicative competence that needs to be enhanced in ELF-oriented classrooms combines the pragmatic exploitation of all linguistic resources available to ELF users (Seidlhofer, Widdowson 2017; Widdowson 2015b) with a broad awareness of the cultural diversity inherent in intercultural communication.

3. Research context and analytical methods

3.1. Participants and data collection

To explore the actual use of ELF in the educational domain, I devised an original experimental investigation. The activity consisted in observing and audio recording actual spoken ELF interactions among Italian students and students participating in intercultural exchange programmes (e.g. Erasmus+, AFS/Intercultura, YFU) in three upper-secondary schools located in the Greater Rome area. Small groups of students from different linguacultural backgrounds participated in prompt-driven discussions. After having been assigned a challenging topic – *Select a song that gives an insight into contemporary society*, the participants were invited to discuss their choices within the group and to reach an agreement on a single, most representative song. The students performed the activity in a 'teacher-free zone', that is to say, in the absence of their own English teacher, so that they could carry out the task without feeling constrained by the standard conditions of the ELT classroom.

The experiment involved 45 students of eleven nationalities, all aged between 15 and 17, speaking nine different L1s; their level of English ranged between the A2 and B2 CEFR standard levels.

The activity involved two subsequent phases. In the first phase I introduced myself and my research on ELF, asking the students what the expression 'English as a Lingua Franca' might mean. Then I presented the task through a series of statements (e.g. "Some songs give us an insight into what life is like in a certain period of time, thus turning into *social documents*"), followed by a brainstorming session about crucial issues that affect our society. After that, the students were asked to think of any contemporary song that might fit in the category of *social documents*. They

were encouraged to answer the following question: “In the year 2500, when people listen to songs that were composed in the 20th and 21st centuries, what will they learn about us?” In the second phase, once they had completed the individual task, the students were divided into groups of four to six participants and started their discussions.

I audio recorded ten speech events having an average duration of 12 minutes, for a total of approximately two hours. The data were collected under totally unconstrained conditions: their English teacher was not present during the interactions, and the students were free to use all the resources at their disposal to converge on a shared decision. Most of the groups used their smartphones to either read (out) the lyrics or play the songs. In this phase my role was merely that of a non-participant observer. In fact, in the pre-activity phase I introduced myself to the participants as an ELF researcher, and explained the purpose of my study, assuring them that my presence during their interactions would be as unobtrusive as possible, and that I would not act as a teacher, that is to say, I would neither make any corrections, nor judge their performance. During the discussions I stayed at quite a distance from the students and sat in what Duranti (1997, p. 101) calls a “blind spot”, namely the least intrusive place in the scene. The data were complemented by some informal feedback interviews, during which the participants, one by one, disclosed their thoughts and feelings about the activity.

=	other-continuation
(more)	uncertain transcription
.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation
<1> </1>	overlapping speech
a:nd	lengthened sound
</L1it> </L1it>	utterance in a speaker’s first language
<ipa> </ipa>	phonetic transcription
(.)	brief pause
(1)	pause timed in seconds
<ono> </ono>	onomatopoeic noises
@	laughter
<@> </@>	laughing voice
<to S5> </to S5>	addressing a speaker in particular, not the whole group
CAPITALS	emphasis of a syllable or a word
<fast> </fast>	fast speech
<soft> </soft>	soft voice
<pvc> </pvc>	variations from NS encodings in terms of phonology, morphology and lexis, including ‘invented’ words

Table 1
Relevant VOICE transcription conventions.

The audio recordings, collected over a three-month period, were then transcribed following the transcription conventions of Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE),[1] as shown in Table 1.

3.2. Analytical approach

Since the focus of this investigation is on the cognitive and communicative processes activated by school-age learners in negotiating meaning in ELF-mediated communication, it is most crucial to explore in detail how speakers interact to accomplish understanding. A Conversation Analysis approach serves this purpose well; it allows the researcher to adopt "an emic (i.e. participant's) perspective on analytical relevancies" and to give "analytical primacy to uncovering interactional achievement and accomplishment rather than failure and deficit" (Firth 2012, p. 1044). Kaur (2016, p. 162) contends that ELF talk is unlikely to be organized much differently from NS talk, but it may differ in the resourceful application of interactional strategies (e.g. turn-taking structure, repair mechanisms); hence, a CA-based analysis unveils "how ELF speakers use the language in and on their own terms" (Seidlhofer 2011, p. 23).

Following both the structural models of conversation analysis (Coulthard, Brazil 1992; Coulthard, Montgomery 1981; Sinclair, Coulthard 1975; Stubbs 1983) and the ethnomethodological models (Firth 1957; Gumperz, Hymes 1964; Sacks *et al*. 1974), I tagged all moves that the interactants performed to make their communication meaningful. The move-tagged exchanges allowed me to observe more closely the detailed composition of the students' interactions, formulating hypotheses on their communicative behaviour in an ELF setting.

The structural moves[2] are useful to understand to what extent the speakers' different linguistic and schematic background impacts on the structure of the talk (Guido 2004); conversely, the ethnomethodological moves[3] prove especially helpful for the comprehension of intercultural communication, as they represent the pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic rules (Thomas 1983) the speakers appropriate cognitively and affectively in an interaction.

After having tagged the conversational moves the participants perform in their exchanges, I delved into a sequential analysis of the communicative

[1] VOICE Transcription Conventions [2.1], https://www.univie.ac.at/voice/page/transcription_general_information.

[2] The taxonomy of structural moves is taken from Guido's (2004) adaptation of the Conversation Frame developed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975).

[3] The ethnomethodological moves are taken from Guido (2004, 2008).

strategies they employ to co-construct meaning and to achieve interactional goals through ELF.

4. Data analysis

In this section a few selected extracts illustrate some of the practices enacted by the participants in the naturally occurring discussions.

4.1. "stop produce carbon footprint"

The following stretch of talk is taken from a long sequence in which four participants discuss pollution. The participants' degree of involvement in the discussion is shown in the dynamics of the turn-taking machinery, to which they contribute with overlapping and latched speech, thus revealing both their willingness to take part in the talk and their ability to handle a shared floor. As in a dance (of words), each participant steps in, and provides a contribution to jointly constructing meaning.

Extract 1 (S1: Italian; S2: German; S3: Italian; S4: Polish)

1062 S1: = i think people will wake up (more) = / *[Upgrade-M]*
1063 S3: = yes = / *[Acknowledge-M]*
1064 S4: = and stop produce carbon footprint. / *[Upgrade-M]*
1065 S3: <2> now or later </2> / *[Upgrade-M]*
1066 S1: <2> *[a]* a:nd yes *[b]* so </2> / *[a. Acknowledge-M + b. possible Reopen-M]*
1067 S2: end carbon footprint / *[Support-M]*

In line 1062 S1 seizes the floor, and hedges her Upgrade move, whereby she imagines a more positive future scenario. The following turns (lines 1063-1066), uttered at a fast tempo, follow one another, either in latched or overlapping speech, indicating a truly collaborative floor. As Coates (1997, p. 70) holds, "the collaborative floor is a shared space, and therefore what is said is construed as being the voice of the group rather than of the individual." In line 1063 S3 latches to S1 with an acknowledgement token, expressing clear-cut agreement. Without a gap, S4 provides a further Upgrade move, whereby he introduces a much-felt issue: *carbon footprint*.

The first round of the dance ends with two overlaps, signalling the speakers' involvement in the issue, and a Support move. In line 1065 S3 'upgrades' the micro-sequence adding a time reference – *now or later* – that he moulds on the English idiom 'sooner or later'. Simultaneously, in overlapping speech (line 1066), S1 recognizes S4's contribution to her statement [a], and with a minimal token (*so*) she possibly performs a Reopen move [b]. The meaning-making negotiation, which started in line 1062, ends

in line 1067, when S2 corroborates S4's contribution to the discussion by making a partial repetition: *end carbon footprint*.

In the co-constructed micro-sequence (lines 1062-1065) the temporal expression used by S3 in line 1065 comes timely. S3 produces a creative time expression – *now or later* – having in mind the English idiom 'sooner or later'. S3's *now and later* is an example of creative idiom – "an adapted realization of an existing conventional expression" (Pitzl 2018, p. 120) – that exploits the virtual meaning potential of the language. S3's new verbal realization removes the alliteration of the original expression, but the substitution of 'sooner' with a shorter word – *now* – makes the time reference sound even more effective. If we consider 'now' as a hyponym of 'sooner', hence a more specific word than the lexical item in the original idiom, we may interpret S3's word substitution as a pragmatic choice influenced by context (Pitzl 2018). I would venture that S3's lexical choice, which cannot be construed as an L1 transfer (in Italian there is no equivalent idiom containing the lexical item 'now'), gives voice to his strong urge to reduce the human impact on the environment as soon as possible, that is to say, starting immediately. Thus, the choice of *now* does not express any 'intentional' creativity, but rather conveys a communicative purpose.

S2's Support move in line 1067 rounds off this jointly built sequence. S2 employs a partial repetition – *end carbon footprint* – to corroborate S4's Upgrade move in line 1064 – *stop produce carbon footprint*. S2 repeats only the last two words of the original utterance, and changes the two verbs used by S4 into one direct monosyllabic verb, *end*, reinforcing the utterance. S2's repetition here serves an array of functions: (i) it recognizes the urgency of the issue, (ii) it upholds S4's statement by signalling alignment with the speaker of the original utterance (Mauranen 2012), and, most importantly, (iii) it is interaction-oriented because it is used to develop rapport and to show involvement in the talk (Lichtkoppler 2007). S2 orients to the co-participant through repetition and establishes affiliation by expressing common ground.

4.2. "the truck tu:f tu:f tu:f"

The following extract is rich in linguistic resources and pragmatic strategies. It contains instances of onomatopoeic additions, interactive repair, and code switching.

Extract 2 (S1: Italian; S3: Italian; S6: Spanish)

283 S3: that's the <L1it> camion {truck} <ipa> kæmɪən </ipa></L1it> who: (.) / *[Inform-M]*
284 S6: truck / *[Repair-M]*

285 S3: who <pvc> trucked {knocked down} </pvc> some people (.) / *[Inform-M]*
286 S6: no the truck / *[Repair-M]*
287 S3: *[a]* <@> no the truck </@> who kills some people (.) *[b]* cos he was on the (.) / *[a. Inform-M + b. Explain-M]*
288 S6: on a tourist erm / *[Explain-M]*
289 S3: yeah / *[Acknowledge-M]*
290 S6: on a tourist = / *[Explain-M]*
291 S3: = that was a party e:r (1) that was a city party and (.) the truck (.) <soft><ono> tu:f tu:f tu:f </ono></soft> the truck @@@ <7> hit some people.</7> / *[Explain-M]*
292 S6: <7> it drove over people.</7> / *[Repair-M]*
293 S1: yeah / *[Acknowledge-M]*
294 S3: <ono> ta ta ta tu: tu: tu: </ono> @@ / *[Explain-M]*

The group has selected *Non mi avete fatto niente*, an Italian song dealing with terrorism. At this stage of the discussion, S3 describes the terrorist attack that took place in Nice, France, on 14 July 2016. Instead of using the word 'lorry' or 'truck', he utters the corresponding Italian word, *camion*, a loanword from French in both Italian and Spanish (the participants' first languages), seemingly unaware of performing a code switch. S6, who has shown sensitivity to grammar and vocabulary issues and an attitude to repair in previous exchanges, takes the floor providing the English word *truck*, which S3 immediately appropriates and authenticates, as if it were a verb, to complete his Inform move. S3 is so involved in the delivery of the information he holds about the terrorist attack that he instantly recognizes the word 'truck' as a verb, and uses it in the past tense: *trucked* (line 285). In the next turn, S6 performs another Repair move, repeating the word *truck* preceded by the definite article, and introduced by a negative token, to indicate that *truck* is a noun, not a verb. Only at this point (line 287) does S3 realize his quite original use of the word *truck* made in line 285; hence he resumes his Inform move [a] with an exact repetition comprising a negative token, whereby he recognizes his misinterpretation. He utters it in a laughing voice, which serves as a face-saving strategy.

The next three lines of the extract (lines 288-290) show cooperative behaviour in a word search moment. The hesitation pause at the end of line 287 allows S6 to provide a hint (*on a tourist erm*), immediately acknowledged by S3. She then repeats it (line 290), supposedly to supply more information, but S3 seizes the floor and explains what in fact happened in Nice. In line 291 S3 latches to S6's second attempt of giving her contribution to the word search, and incorporates the idea of *tourist* (lines 289 and 290) in the expression *city party*. In the same turn, he recapitulates what he has just said, softly adding onomatopoeic sounds that copy the noise of a running truck. S3 is aware of his unusual fashion of expressing information, and, in fact, the second time he utters the word *truck* he

produces a burst of laughter; only after that does he conclude his turn reformulating the information given in a previous turn (line 287).

The addition of onomatopoeic sounds to make the conversation livelier, despite the most serious topic being dealt with, is interpreted by S6 as a further request for lexical help. That is why she overlaps in line 292, providing a complete sentence that contains the supposedly missing verb. In this case S6 misinterprets S3's use of onomatopoeic sounds as S3 does not flag a problem, conversely, he peppers his contribution and successfully completes his turn verbalizing his *tu:f tu:f tu:f* . The Acknowledge move uttered by S1, the participant who has chosen the song about terrorism, confirms that the information provided by S3 and S6 with a collaborative overlap has effectively been delivered (line 293). The sequence ends with another instance of onomatopoeic sounds that reproduce the shots fired during the terrorist attack. This time, S3's turn is totally non-verbal: his onomatopoeic contribution to the discussion, accompanied by laughter, is not followed by a verbal explanation.

The lexical choice – *camion* – made by S3 at the start of the selected extract, and pronounced as if it were an English word, is not perceived by the speaker as a code switch since he appropriates and creatively authenticates the word *truck*, suggested by S6 in line 284, using it as a verb to complete his move. I interpreted it as an instance of 'oblivious' code switch, prompted by the foreign origin of the word in the speaker's first language, Italian, and induced by strong emotional charge, whereby he informs the participants in the discussion about the Nice terrorist attack. The series of repairs in lines 284-287 unfold instances of other-correction (*truck* and *the truck*), other-initiated correction (*the truck*), and an instance of a quite creative use of the language (*trucked*). S6 does not overlook S3's code switch despite the proximity of the word in the two L1s spoken by the participants in the discussion; complying with the constrained rules of the ELT classroom, she serves up the correct English word.

In the second part of the extract S3 implements his Explain moves employing a highly effective communicative strategy. He uses onomatopoeic sounds to strengthen the message he intends to deliver (lines 291 and 294). His laughter tokens in both turns may reveal S3's awareness of his unusual (at least in the traditional ELT classroom) – yet playful – fashion to handle the discussion. S3 uses sound effects as a pragmatic strategy, which he employs with great ability. Such skill, according to Coates (1997, p. 83), "is widely recognized as a feature of boys' talk". In my data, though, instances of sound effects are also found in girls' talk.

The extract exemplifies the process of meaning negotiation and the variety of strategies employed by the students to ensure effective communication and mutual intelligibility. Constructing meaning is

synonymous with collaboration; in fact, as Mauranen (2015, p. 45) notes, there is a "pronounced propensity of ELF speakers to engage in cooperative behaviour". Among speakers who do not share the same common ground and mediate knowledge with their own cultural schemata, constructing meaning may also imply to try out different – sometimes original – paths for accomplishing satisfactory communication. S3 and S6 are eager to give their contribution to the discussion, and to do so they adopt multiple strategies. S6 is a quiet girl who has met the co-participants only once before the spoken activity. She first deploys a repair practice (*camion/truck*), then she engages in a word search (*on a tourist*...) triggered by a minimal hesitation pause on the part of S3; and finally, misinterpreting S3's self-laughter as a request for help, she completes S3's utterance in overlapping speech (*it drove over people*). Conversely, S3 is a playful boy who resorts to unusual pragmatic strategies for effective communicative purposes. He first handles his unintentional code switch (*camion*) – which I previously defined as 'oblivious' – with remarkable skill by uttering the term as if it were English. Then he falls back on his playfulness to make a death scenario more vivid with vocal additions in the form of onomatopoeic sounds. Both students succeed in making meaning and in getting their message across – the content of the Italian song. In fact, S1, the student who originally suggested the song, acknowledges their jointly constructed utterances in line 293.

4.3. "who cares? we have to think about the fu:t- the future"

In the selected extract a mispronunciation initiates a brief humorous sequence of turn-taking that comprises teasing-like utterances and a witty quip. The sequence is at a fast tempo, resulting from the participants' competing for the floor.

Extract 3 (S1: Italian; S2: German; S3: Italian; S4: Polish)

1015 S1: = *[a]* who cares? *[b]* we won't even be here (.) and = / *[a. Challenge-M + b. Upgrade-M]*
1016 S3: = *[a]* yeah who cares? *[b]* we have to think about the <ipa> fu:t- </ipa> the future so = / *[a. Acknowledge-M + b. Focus-M]*
1017 S2: = <@> the food </@> @@@ = / *[Challenge-M]*
1018 S4: = food also @ / *[Acknowledge-M]*
1019 S3: <6><@> the future so: </@></6> / *[Explain-M]*
1020 SS: <6> @@@ </6> / *[Acknowledge-M]*
1021 S2: <@> a:h we get the (micky) out of the poor guy </@> @@@ = / *[Oh-Receipt-M]*
1022 S4: = *[a]* okay *[b]* my song (.) there are part of the words like (.) man don't worry and going to when this game called life (.) *[c]* so (.) / *[a. Finalizer-M + b. Inform-M + c. possible Evaluate-M]*

A student has selected a song about pollution and S1 and S3 are commenting on a future environmental scenario. In line 1016 S3 latches to S1 to acknowledge S1's Challenge move [a], using a response token (*yeah*) and an exact repetition (*who cares?*), and to express his own idea through a Focus move [b], containing a self-repair (*the fu:t- the future*). S3's mispronunciation of the word 'future' is perceived as a slip of the tongue – 'food'– by S2, who immediately takes the floor: she laughingly utters the word *food* and roars with laughter (line 1017). In the next latched turn, S4 makes a humorous remark (*food also*) in a serious tone, and he follows it with a self-laughter token. S4 manipulates his voice skilfully, which contributes to the humorous effect of his comment. In the following lines (1019-1020) an overlap occurs. While S3 gains the floor, repeating the repair (*the future*) in a laughing voice and recognizing the fun triggered by his own mispronunciation, the other participants acknowledge S4's witty quip with several tokens of laughter. The sequence continues in line 1021: with an Oh-Receipt move S2 laughingly admits that they are teasing S3, yet she carries on laughing. Latching to S2's comment, S4, the student who had contributed to the humorous moment with a witty remark, seriously closes the sequence with a Finalizer move [a]. To this end, he uses an *okay* token as a face-saving device in favour of the entire group, and starts reporting the lyrics of his song [b] (line 1022).

The sequential analysis highlights the twofold purpose of S4's humorous remark (*food also*) in line 1018. First it serves S4 to align with the prior turn, and secondly it allows S4 to play down S3's mispronunciation by acknowledging that we must think about food too. The serious tone of his voice orients to S3's previous utterance and gives prominence to the quip. Along the sequence S4 manages to balance the humorous interactions (lines 1020-1021) with the need to resume the regular unfolding of the discussion (line 1022). His latching to S2 in line 1022 and his Finalizer move denote solidarity with the participant who is being teased and his intention to maintain good relations with him.

4.4. "i have to listen spanish trap"

This stretch of talk sounds as a 'mating dance' that aims to negotiate comity and affiliation.

Extract 4 (S1: Italian; S2: German; S3: Italian; S4: Polish; S5: Spanish)

1093 S3: <to S5> what about you? which is your favourite?</to S5> (.) / *[Elicit-M]*
1094 S5: trap / *[Answer-M]*
1095 S3: no (.) <to S5> your favourite type of music?</to S5> (.) yes / *[Elicit-M]*
1096 S5: trap / *[Answer-M]*

1097 S1: a:h <7> trap </7> / *[Oh-Receipt-M]*
1098 S3: <7> a:h trap too </7> (1) / *[Oh-Receipt-M]*
1099 S3: spanish (.) <8> spanish trap </8> / *[Upgrade-M]*
1100 S4: <8> aFRIca trap </8> @ / *[Challenge-M]*
1101 SS: @@@ / *[Acknowledge-M]*
1102 S3: <@> i have to listen spanish trap </@> / *[Inform-M]*
1103 S1: <@> not polish?</@> / *[Challenge-M]*
1104 S4: @@@@ / *[Acknowledge-M]*
1105 S3: <@> i have to listen polish trap too </@> / *[Inform-M]*
1106 S5: <@> or french trap?</@> / *[Challenge-M]*

In the first line of the extract S3 resumes the role of 'master of ceremonies' he has played all along the discussion, and turns to S5 to keep up the conversation. Apparently, S3 believes that S5's answer to his question in line 1094 (*trap*) refers to S4's favourite music, and this answer does not reflect her own preference, that is why he initiates his turn in line 1095 with an abrupt *no*. In the same line S3 repeats his Elicit move, expanding it to make his request more explicit (*your favourite type of music?*), and adding *yes*, as if to reinforce it. At this stage, the word 'trap' triggers a sort of "choric" performance (Firth 1964, p. 112) in all but one participants in the discussion, emphasizing the 'harmonious dance' nature of what they are saying rather than the actual content of their exchanges. After a couple of overlapped Oh-Receipt moves (lines 1097-1098), which also serve to acknowledge S5's response, S3 upgrades the word *trap* with a nationality adjective (line 1098). The use of the nationality adjective – *spanish* – preceding the word trap may appear predictable in this turn, as S5 is Spanish. On the contrary, S4's move, uttered in an overlap and followed by a laughter token in line 1100, may indicate a Challenge move that aims at building rapport and lightening the discussion. Also the stress that falls on the second syllable of the word 'Africa' – *aFRIca*, which here serves as an adjective, may disclose a pragmatic choice. All students laugh and start a series of humorous exchanges – a sort of little show – with the word *trap* preceded by a nationality adjective. Jokingly, S1 challenges S3, asking him why he does not also listen to Polish trap, in consideration that S4 is Polish (line 1103). S4 immediately acknowledges S1's Challenge move with a loud burst of laughter. Laughingly, S3 takes up the suggestion made by S1 (line 1105); in so doing he may express the intention to broaden his cultural horizons. In the following turn, S5 concludes the humorous sequence with a further Challenge move, whereby she suggests listening to French trap, possibly hinting at the song she had previously presented.

The sequence reveals that the participants can manage intersubjectivity in a playful fashion, using Challenge moves, rhythmic repetitions, and humour. They seem to negotiate comity (Leech 1983), namely the building and maintaining rapport, and to create a friendly and communal atmosphere.

Interestingly, their favourite kind of music serves as a catalyst for "a convergence of participants' worlds in affective terms" (Aston 1993, p. 226). The sequence shows the interactional aspect of their communication and the strategies they employ to "end up feeling comfortable with each other and friendly" (Brown, Yule 1983, p. 12); even their Challenge moves, uttered jokingly or accompanied by a laughter token, act as a trigger to start (line 1100) or to nourish (lines 1103 and 1106) humorous exchanges. Furthermore, their exchanges sound like a dance (of words) performed by perfectly timed dancers (speakers) who act out cooperatively and consonantly.

The little show revolving around the word 'trap', accompanied by nationality adjectives, also discloses the intercultural dimension of the participants' interactions. The speakers 'play' with each other's nationalities, and in doing so they appear to strengthen the intercultural bond within their international Erasmus+ group, in addition to building comity.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The exploration of the ELF discourse naturally unfolded by school-age ELF users under unconstrained ELT classroom conditions reveals that the speakers employ a wide range of strategies aiming to (i) achieve effective communication, and (ii) create a friendly – often playful – atmosphere, negotiating rapport. They tend to use the language in a natural way, pragmatically shaping it for their communicative and social goals.

All speech events show that students generally orient to their interlocutors enacting a variety of practices. They use repetitions and implement Check moves to ensure that a word, or the whole utterance, has been understood (e.g. *do you know what does it mean tough?*); they make the discourse explicit and clearer by negotiating topic (e.g. *eh it's a good idea the champions*); they draw on synonyms – usually uttered immediately after the original word – to pre-empt non-understanding (e.g. *the melody (.) the tune*; *the text (.) the lyrics*); they finally perform Try-Marker moves[4] (e.g. *right?*, *ha ha?, you know?*) to test whether (i) the listener has well-interpreted the prior utterance (e.g. *and poverty also exists everywhere (.) right?*), or (ii) the interlocutors are familiar with the new referent introduced in the talk (e.g. *refugees on the program that erm closing borders (.) ha ha?*).

The extracts above demonstrate that school-age ELF users may be skilful *languagers*. They make a creative use of the language to give voice to their urges, adding pragmatic strength to the interactional speech (e.g. *now or later*, line 1065 in Extract 1). They sometimes coin new lexical items (e.g.

[4] Try-Marker move with raising intonation for the speaker to test his/her addressee whether s/he has recognized a referent (Guido 2004, p. 350).

<pvc> jemmy {twin} </pvc> towers) – possibly with a transfer from their L1 – making the discourse flow without interruptions and, at the same time, peppering it. They call on any resources at their disposal that render the talk livelier and sometimes more pleasant. For example, onomatopoeic additions, such as the ones in Extract 2 (*<soft><ono> tu:f tu:f tu:f </ono></soft>*, line 291; *<ono> ta ta ta tu: tu: tu: </ono>*, line 294), contribute to making the unfolding speech more vivid, ultimately impacting more on the listener.

The school-age ELF users involved in the study display a highly cooperative behaviour, not only in word search moments or in interactive repairs, but also in constructing humorous sequences. They appear to be eager to give their contribution to the discussion, either to ensure that communication flows smoothly, or to enhance in-group belonging. For example, in Extract 4 the students cooperatively support their affiliation to the Erasmus+ group they belong to, and create a jocular atmosphere through the jokingly performed Challenge moves focusing on the word 'trap'. Extract 1, too, shows the students' cooperativeness within a 'collaborative floor' frame. In fact, all participants contribute (i) to making meaning, exploiting the turn-taking mechanism to the full, through latched and overlapping speech, and (ii) to giving support to one another while imagining a future environmental scenario with no carbon dioxide emissions.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that school-age ELF users frequently perform interactional skills to negotiate comity, to establish affiliation with their interlocutors, and to build up a pleasant atmosphere. The participants of all groups appear to use any linguistic resources available in their repertoire to create and/or maintain interpersonal relationships. Laughter is a much-employed device that serves the twofold functions of capturing the interlocutors' support, and of invoking solidarity within the group in a humorous fashion. The little show set up in Extract 4, for example, displays the "in-tuneness" (Pullin Stark 2009) of the participants who, either laughingly or by means of simultaneous laughter, perform highly coordinated exchanges aiming to lighten up the atmosphere and to foster solidary bonds.

The results of the analysis indicate that school-age ELF users orient to their interlocutors, and generally do not signal any 'deviations' from Standard English lexicogrammatical forms as troublemaking for understanding. In fact, the students appear to activate a variety of communicative strategies orienting to content-delivery exchanges, usually glossing over the formal correctness of their message. In one speech event, however, a participant, possibly sensitive to NS encoded forms or latently constrained by the ELT classroom rules, expresses the urge to take the floor and to provide corrections for non-standard linguistic realizations. Extract 2 exemplifies her need to dispense the English equivalent of *camion*, a word shared by the two L1s spoken by the co-participants in the discussion, interrupting the communicative flow, and

leading to a series of Repair moves.

Most importantly, findings show that when school-age English learners turn into ELF users, they put into play their language skills but also themselves as individuals with their own identity, cultural background and experiences. Their robust cooperativeness, both in word search moments and in interactive repairs, disclose the participants' attentive listenership and effective engagement in the communicative event. Findings also suggest that the participants convey their highly interactional orientation through either coordinated dances of words, often accompanied by laughter, or a skilful use of their multilingual repertoire, namely through practices that bring about "affective convergence" (Aston 1993, p. 228). These findings are also supported by several informal retrospective interviews I conducted at the end of each speech event. During the feedback interviews the students expressed feelings of self-satisfaction and a sense of agency, having been the protagonists of a "new" (*verbatim*) language experience in their learning context.

Furthermore, the study offers suggesting evidence for the crucial 'ELF-user' role played by English learners in their learning context. In fact, school-age ELF users act as skilful *languagers*, drawing on their verbal and non-verbal repertoires, and as 'rapport builders', through the negotiation of relational goals leading to satisfactory communication. In short, the analysis contributes to demonstrate that, regardless of their age and their learner status, ELF speakers use the language effectively and efficiently to accomplish their communicative and social goals, and in so doing they attribute legitimacy to their own English.

To conclude, the creative and social dimensions of ELF discourse that emerge from this analysis carry important pedagogical implications for the ELT classroom. English teachers' attention to the correctness of linguistic forms should rather turn to the effectiveness of communication, as it generally occurs in ELF interactions. The spoken activity described in this paper is a significant cognitive-experiential practice for enhancing communicative competence in ELF that should be replicated in ELT classrooms. The audio recordings, along with the transcripts of the speech events, may be employed in noticing and reflecting activities that promote language awareness and thinking about intercultural communication. Further investigation adopting a multimodal approach might explore the non-verbal interactional resources (e.g. gesture, eye gaze) that school-age ELF users employ to make communication more meaningful to them.

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Acknowledgements: This paper was partially supported by the PRIN 2015 – Prot. 2015REZ4EZ: "English as a Lingua Franca in domain-specific contexts of intercultural communication" (a research project run by the University of Salento, the University of Verona and Roma Tre University).

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