Lingue e Linguaggi
Lingue Linguaggi 66 (2024), 75-103
ISSN 2239-0367, e-ISSN 2239-0359
DOI 10.1285/i22390359v66p75
http://siba-ese.unisalento.it, © 2024 Università del Salento

WORLD-WIDE ENGLISH
The Internet as a language learning tool

SERENA GHISELLI
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

Abstract –Access to the Internet, both to study and for leisure activities, is ubiquitous today. The Web contains an extensive range of contents, of which about 55% is in English (W3Techs, 2023). In Iceland, a collective seven-year research project was carried out on English language exposure (Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018). One of the findings was that students learn more English vocabulary through access to the media in their free time than through focused learning. Studies on the increased informal contact with English were also carried out in other European and extra-European contexts (Berns *et al*. 2007; Kusyk *et al.* 2020; Muñoz, Elke 2020) and Italy is seeing a similar trend (Pavesi, Ghia 2020), but research about naturalistic English learning in the country is still scarce. The ongoing PRIN project "The informalisation of English language learning through media: Language input, learning outcomes and sociolinguistic attitudes from an Italian perspective" (Prot. 2020NNJTW3) aims at filling this research gap. The goal of this presentation is to give a descriptive overview of a set of data collected in the framework of the PRIN project at the University of Salento, Lecce. A survey about English media access and usage was administered to 995 University students. This contribution focuses on the access to the Internet, in particular to YouTube, social media, blogs and forums, web pages, podcasts, radios, apps and e-commerce websites. Data about the frequency and the length of online activities carried out in English will be discussed in relation to students' self-assessed level of English, their attitude towards the language and their socio-cultural background.

Keywords: EFL, the Internet, YouTube, informal learning, incidental learning.

1. Introduction

English is widely used worldwide, in both the physical and digital realms. Today, accessing the Internet for educational and recreational purposes is a widespread habit and it has been estimated that about 55% of online content is in English (W3Techs 2023). Therefore, there are many occasions of incidental English learning on the Web.

Berns *et al.* (2007) highlighted the dominance of English in the European context, where it is the main language used in the media, in schools, in science and technology and in the workplace (where English knowledge is increasingly required of employees). However, despite the extension of informal learning networks, formal learning is not really harnessing the

potential of informal learning opportunities to enhance formal teaching (Czerkawski 2016). It is, therefore, necessary to study informal access to English by students, in order to understand the habits, beliefs and socio-cultural characteristics that favour or hinder informal English acquisition, and take such context into consideration when designing formal English courses.

This paper begins with a brief overview of informal English access, followed by a description of the results of a survey administered at the University of Salento (Lecce, Italy) about informal contact with English. The survey was carried out within the framework of a national project financed by the Italian Ministry of Education, titled 'The informalisation of English language learning through the media'. Subsequently, exposure indexes used to analyze the exposure to YouTube and the Internet in English will be discussed. The final sections examine the interaction between students' socio-cultural backgrounds and attitudes, and media exposure levels, leading to observations on emerging trends. The paper ends with some remarks on the findings and how they contribute to research on informal English acquisition.

2. Theoretical framework

According to Dressman (2020, p.4), informal and formal language learning are defined as follows:

> [...] informal language learning refers to any activities taken consciously or unconsciously by a learner outside of formal instruction that lead to an increase in the learner's ability to communicate in a second (or other, non-native) language. By "formal instruction," I mean learning activities organized by a teacher that are systematic and regularly scheduled.

Informal English learning has been the object of various studies in Europe. Toffoli and Sockett (2010) conducted research to investigate online informal learning practices among students of the University of Strasbourg majoring in non-language subjects. The very same survey was administered in 2012 at a French university, providing a more detailed view of how these students engaged in informal English learning online. In particular, the survey was administered to students who had a limited formal English exposure consisting of a two-hour weekly language course over a 24-week academic year (Sockett 2014). Even if the Internet originated as a source of information based on textual data, Sockett's survey results from 2009 and 2012 show a dominance of listening over reading.

A study by Tan (2013) focused on how students' search and assessment methods within informal learning contexts, particularly on YouTube, influenced their transition to a mixed formal learning environment. Through semi-structured interviews conducted in focus groups, several noteworthy findings emerged. Initially, students continue to depend on educators to pinpoint trustworthy and academically robust information. In situations where information is diverse and abundant, students typically lack the necessary skills to effectively navigate and discern credible content from unreliable sources. Additionally, students highlighted the value of informal networks in their learning journeys, despite their preference and esteem for formal educational settings. Tan emphasises the necessity of aiding students in developing digital literacy skills while maintaining autonomy, enjoyment, and exploration in informal learning environments.

Kusyk (2017) administered a questionnaire about online informal learning of English (OILE) to 953 university students in France and Germany. This was followed by a qualitative study on the development in complexity, accuracy, and fluency of three respondents over five months. In both countries, participants engaged in reception activities more frequently than in production activities. Kusyk's findings show major differences among individuals and within the same person, emphasising the necessity to view second language development as an intricate rather than straightforward process, particularly when examining it in an informal online setting.

In Iceland, a seven-year research project was carried out on English language exposure (Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018). In every chapter of the volume the findings of different studies are described; together, these research projects contribute to the joint effort of mapping the role of English in the Icelandic society. One of the findings was that students acquire more English vocabulary through access to the media in their free time than through focused learning.

A recently published volume about informal contact with English in Germany and Switzerland (Krüger 2023) revealed that young learners have extensive exposure to English-language media. Greater exposure correlated with enhanced language skills and variations in media preferences, and media channel choices (e.g. television, books, the Internet) were influenced by socio-economic background. In particular, students of higher socio-economic status have greater exposure to English outside of formal education, primarily through diverse media sources such as books, newspapers, movies, TV series, and online content. On the other hand, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds spend more time on English-language websites but have less overall exposure to English at home. In addition, the majority of students consume media channels in a passive manner, primarily by reading, listening

to, and watching English media content. Conversely, only a small percentage of students actively participate by creating and sharing content themselves.

According to the results of a first study with 305 university students by Pavesi and Ghia (2020), Italy is seeing a similar trend compared to the rest of Europe, but research about naturalistic English learning in the country is still scarce. The project 'The informalisation of English language learning through the media' aims to fill this research gap. The project is based on two instruments constructed and validated specifically to collect data about informal access to English: a questionnaire, the Informal English Contact and Learning questionnaire (IECoL) and a receptive vocabulary test adapted from Nation (1990). Reliability and internal consistency of the instruments are confirmed by Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (Pavesi *et al.* 2023). This is a methodological innovation and a key contribution for a research field where data are mainly represented by the information provided by respondents.

3. Research questions and aims

The focus of this paper is YouTube access and exposure to online content in English among students of the University of Salento measured through a survey. The approach taken is descriptive, with a final data analysis section looking at interactions between media exposure and the socio-cultural background of respondents.

The research questions of this study are the following:

1) What are the respondents' habits in the use of YouTube and the Internet in English?
2) Do the self-assessed level of English and respondents' attitude towards the language influence their exposure to these media in English?
3) Does the respondents' socio-cultural background influence their exposure to these media in English?

In this paper, the term 'media' is used exclusively to refer to the Internet and YouTube. The aim of this paper is to gain a better understanding of the use of the Internet and YouTube in English by the students of the University of Salento. Such knowledge may support researchers and university teachers in formulating ideas about how students' informal contact with English could be harnessed to foster formal English education in the university context.

4. Materials and methods

Information about students' access to media in English in their free time was collected through an online survey, which students compiled during university

lectures using either their computers, smartphones or tablets. The survey was anonymous and anonymity was guaranteed by codes which were given to the students as usernames to access the survey. The data were collected at the University of Salento in November and December 2022. Both undergraduate and graduate students of various degree courses participated in the survey. The data collected were divided by Bachelor and Master degree students. According to the area of study, three groups were identified: science and technology (engineering, biology, mathematics, physics); humanities (languages, Italian studies, primary teacher education, philosophy, art); and social, economic, and legal studies (law, economics, political science).

To analyze the collected data, two media exposure indices were calculated, one for YouTube and the other for the Internet, following the example of Pavesi and Ghia (2020). These authors gave the following definition of high-exposure subjects:

> High-exposure subjects correspond to those participants who report high frequency of access to English input, from often to very often, and a length of exposure exceeding 30 minutes each time (Pavesi, Ghia 2020, p. 87)

The responses were divided into three levels (no exposure, low exposure, and high exposure) based on the amount of time spent on an activity multiplied by its frequency (exposure index= frequency * time).

Numeric values were assigned to Likert scale responses regarding the frequency of access and the length of time devoted to a certain media content in English. For frequency, the values were the following: never = 0, rarely = 1 (once or twice a month), sometimes = 2 (once a week), often = 3 (twice or three times a week), very often = 4 (every day or almost every day). Duration was coded using the following values: never = 0, less than 30 minutes = 1, between 30 minutes and one hour = 2, about one hour = 3, between one and two hours = 4, more than two hours = 5. 'No exposure' is the category corresponding to participants not engaging in a specific activity; 'low exposure' for those scoring below 6 for a particular activity; 'high exposure' includes students scoring 6 or above. The threshold of 6 for high exposure indicates that the person accesses that type of English content from often to very often and with a duration of at least 30 minutes every time they are exposed to English contents (Pavesi, Ghia 2020).

This paper focuses on the questions about the access to YouTube and to Internet contents. To test the access of English contents on the web, the survey included the following questions (Pavesi *et al*. 2023):

15. 2. *Guardi YouTube in lingua inglese?* * [Do you watch videos in English on YouTube?]
[only one option possible]
Sì [Yes] [respondent redirected to question 16]
No [No] [respondent redirected to question 22]

16. 2.1. *Quanto spesso guardi YouTube in lingua inglese?* [How often do you watch videos on YouTube in English?]
[only one option possible]
Molto spesso (tutti i giorni o quasi) [Very often: Every day or almost every day]; *Spesso (due o tre volte la settimana)* [Often: Two or three times a week]; *Qualche volta (una volta alla settimana)* [Sometimes: Once a week]; *Raramente (una o due volte al mese)* [Rarely: Once or twice per month]; *Mai* [Never]

17. 2.2. *Per quanto tempo guardi YouTube in lingua inglese complessivamente il giorno in cui lo fai?* [When on YouTube how long do you watch videos in English overall in a day?]
[only one option possible]
Piu di due ore [More than two hours]; *Da una a due ore* [Between one and two hours]; *Circa un'ora* [About an hour]; *Da 30 minuti a un'ora* [Between 30 minutes and one hour]; *Meno di 30 minuti* [Less than 30 minutes]; *Mai* [Never]

18. 2.3. *Se guardi video su YouTube in lingua inglese, li preferisci:* [If you watch videos on YouTube in English, do you prefer them]
[only one option possible]
In lingua originale senza sottotitoli [In the original language without subtitles]; *Con sottotitoli in inglese* [With English subtitles]; *Con sottotitoli in italiano* [With Italian subtitles]

19. 2.4. *Quali tipi di video guardi su YouTube in inglese?* [What types of videos do you watch on YouTube in English?]
È possibile indicare più di una opzione. [More options possible.]
Video musicali [Music videos]; *Tutorial* [Tutorials]; *Recensioni* [Reviews]; *Scene di film e serie TV* [Scenes from films and TV-series]; Sport; *Video comici* [Funny videos]; *Documentari* [Documentaries]; *Ricette di cucina* [Recipes]; *Talk show* [Talk shows]; *Gameplay* [Gameplay]; *News* [News]; *Trailer* [Trailers]; *Interviste* [Interviews]; *Celebrità* [Celebrities]; *YouTuber* [YouTubers]; *Altro* [Other]

20. 2.5. *Se guardi video su YouTube in inglese, quale supporto utilizzi?* [If you watch videos on YouTube in English, which device do you use?]
È possibile indicare più di una opzione. [More options possible.]
Televisore [TV] / *Computer* [Computer]/ *Tablet* [Tablet] / *Smartphone* [Smartphone]

[…]

34. 5. *Usi Internet in lingua inglese?* * [Do you surf the Internet to engage in activities in English?]
[only one option possible]
*S*ì [Yes] [respondent redirected to question 35]
No [No] [respondent redirected to question 44]

35. 5.1. *Quanto spesso svolgi le seguenti attività in lingua inglese?* [How often do you engage in the following activities in English?]
[only one option per row possible]
Leggo post e contenuti sui social network [I read posts and contents on social networks]; *Scrivo contenuti sui social network* [I write content on social networks]; *Leggo blog e forum* [I read blogs and forums]; *Scrivo su blog e forum* [I write in blogs and forums]; *Leggo pagine web* [I read web pages]; *Ascolto podcast* [I listen to podcasts]; *Ascolto programmi radio* [I listen to radio programmes]; *Utilizzo app* [I use apps]; *Faccio acquisti su siti* [I shop online]; *Altro* [Other]

36. 5.2. *Per quanto tempo usi Internet in lingua inglese per le seguenti attività complessivamente il giorno in cui lo fai?* [When you surf the Internet how long do you engage in the following activities in English overall in a day?]
[only one option per row possible]
Leggo post e contenuti sui social network [I read posts and contents on social networks]; *Scrivo contenuti sui social network* [I write content on social networks]; *Leggo blog e forum* [I read blogs and forums]; *Scrivo su blog e forum* [I write in blogs and forums]; *Leggo pagine web* [I read web pages]; *Ascolto podcast* [I listen to podcasts]; *Ascolto programmi radio* [I listen to radio programmes]; *Utilizzo app* [I use apps]; *Faccio acquisti su siti* [I shop online]; *Altro* [Other]
37. 5.3. *Se e quando accedi ai social network, qual è la percentuale approssimativa di contenuti in inglese?* [When you access social networks what is the percentage of English contents that you find approximately?]
[only one option possible]
100% / 75% / 50% / 25% / 0%
38. 5.4. *Se accedi a social network in inglese, quali usi?* [If you access social networks in English, which ones do you use?]
È possibile indicare più di una opzione. [More options possible]
Facebook; Instagram; TikTok; Twitter; Pinterest; Tumblr; *Altro* [Other]
39. 5.5. *Se accedi a pagine web in inglese, a quali accedi?* [If you access web pages in English, which ones do you access?]
È possibile indicare più di una opzione. [More options possible.]
Wikipedia; *Altri wiki* [Other wikis]; *Dizionari di inglese* [English dictionaries]; *Siti di notizie e attualità* [News and current affairs web pages]; *Hobby e cucina* [Hobbies and Cooking]; *Altro* [Other]
40. 5.6. *Se accedi a blog e forum in inglese, a quali accedi?* [If you access blogs and forums in English, which ones do you access?]
È possibile indicare più di una opzione. [More options possible.]
Gaming; *Musica* [Music]; *Viaggi* [Travels]; *Estetica e moda* [Beauty and fashion]; *Tecnologia* [Technology]; *Cucina* [Cooking]; *Libri* [Books]; *Grammatica e uso dell'inglese* [Grammar and Use of English]; Cinema; *Auto/moto* [Cars/motorbikes]; Sport; *Altro* [Other]
41. 5.7. *Su Internet interagisci in inglese:* [On the web you interact in English:]
[only one option per row possible]
Con parlanti nativi di inglese [With native English speakers]; *Con parlanti non nativi di inglese* [With non-native English speakers]

For a full description of the questionnaire and the list of all the other questions, refer to Pavesi *et al.* (2023).

First, a description of the data is provided. For each section, graphs were created with Microsoft Excel 2019 to facilitate data evaluation and comparison, specifically:

- bar charts for survey distribution among the three study areas and to represent online interaction in English;
- a pie chart for the self-assessed level of English;
- 100% stacked bar chart to represent access to a certain type of content (frequency) and exposure duration (length);

- sorted bar charts to represent questions allowing multiple answers (e.g. genres of audiovisual products the participant watches). The bars are sorted from the most common answer to the least common.

A second part of the analysis focuses on the results of correlations between a set of predictors and exposure to YouTube and Internet contents in English. The goal of the analysis was to explore whether exposure to YouTube and the Internet in English (outcome) significantly differs depending on students' self-assessed level of English, their attitude towards the language and their socio-cultural background (predictors). Separate group comparisons were carried out between the outcomes and every predictor.

The study employed Pearson's Chi-squared test (χ^2) to conduct comparisons, a statistical method designed for assessing the presence of significant associations between categorical variables (Weiss 2011). This test was selected due to the categorical nature of all variables under examination, aligned with the paper's objective of investigating potential differences in media exposure across distinct groups.

The analysis assessed statistical significance, which evaluates the probability that the null hypothesis is true, relative to the permissible degree of uncertainty about the true result. The amount of uncertainty a researcher is prepared to tolerate, known as the significance level, is set at $p < 0.05$, meaning there is a 5% probability that the study's outcome may be wrong (Tenny, Abdelgawad 2024). Moreover, the analysis extended to incorporate effect size, a quantifiable indicator of the magnitude of observed phenomena relevant to the research object (Kelley, Preacher 2012). Specifically, Cramer's *V* was computed as this effect size measures the strength of association between two categorical variables (Bobbitt 2023). Cramer's *V* is commonly used for chi-squared tests and is the square root of the chi-squared statistic divided by the total number of observations, adjusted for the table dimensions. Cramer's *V* ranges from 0 (indicating no association) to 1 (suggesting perfect association). Results were interpreted based on the following guidelines: ≤ 0.1 for a small effect, between 0.2 and 0.5 for a moderate effect, and ≥ 0.5 for a large effect. The statistical analysis was performed using *Studio 4.2.1* (RStudio 2022), specifically the packages *stats* and *effectsize*.

5. Results

The total number of surveys conducted was 1097. Participants were required to be native Italian speakers; therefore, eight students who declared a different native language were subsequently excluded. Additionally, among these eight non-native Italian speakers, seven had not submitted the vocabulary test, along with another 68 students, despite instructions emphasising the need to submit

both parts by clicking as required. These 75 surveys were excluded from the analysis because it was not possible to compare the questionnaires on English media use with the results of the receptive vocabulary test aimed at assessing foreign language proficiency. The vocabulary test is not considered in this paper. Another 26 surveys were excluded due to incomplete questionnaire responses. Overall, the data presented in this paper are based on 995 surveys that include both questionnaire and vocabulary test data. The results described in this section focus on questionnaire answers about YouTube and the Internet exposure. These results are organised into four subsections: participants' background, exposure to YouTube, exposure to the Internet and the influence of social cultural background on media exposure.

5.1. Participants' background

65% of respondents are female, 34% male and 1% did not declare their gender. The majority of participants come from the province of Lecce (69%), followed by Brindisi (14%) and Taranto (12%); the remaining 5% come from other provinces. This sample can be considered representative of the student population of the University of Salento, since these proportions are in line with the data about students enrolled in AY 2022/2023, when the questionnaires were administered (Università del Salento 2023). Ten students indicated a second mother tongue: dialect (6), English (2), German (1) and Japanese (1). The majority of them (59%) do not use other languages, apart from English, in their free time. The mean age of their first contact with English at school was M=5.96 (SD= 1.27), which corresponds to primary school entry age in Italy, and most of them (61%) had taken extracurricular English courses at some point during their lives. Few respondents had spent time in a foreign country where they had to use English: only 23% had been abroad, but only 16% of them had spent more than three months abroad.

Overall, over half of the students indicated proficiency in more than one language in addition to their mother tongue. Specifically, 14% know one more language, 33% two, 31% three, 14% four and 8% more than four additional languages. The age of first contact with English during leisure activities ranged from 10 to 15 years (57% of respondents).

At the time of the survey most respondents (66%) had an age falling between 20 and 22 years. Almost half of the respondents (48%) come from a humanities or science high school (*liceo classico* and *liceo scientifico*), 20% from a technical high school, 14% from a language high school (*liceo linguistico*), 4% from a professional high school and the remaining 14% from other types of high schools.

Respondents answered a question about their parents' level of education where they had to select the highest qualification held by their father and the

highest qualification held by their mother, choosing among middle school certificate, high school diploma, university degree, PhD/Master and Other. Combining the answers given for both parents, some trends stand out:

27% of the students have parents (both father and mother) who did not gain a high school diploma; 49% have parents who hold a high school diploma (either father or mother); 24% have parents who gained a university degree (either father or mother). Respondents' distribution by curriculum area (science and technology; humanities; and social, economic, and legal studies) and by study level (Bachelor's vs Master's degree) is represented in Figure 1, as the count of the number of answers collected.

As can be seen from the bar charts, the majority of those surveyed come from curricula in the humanities area, where there were larger classes, followed by social, economic, and legal studies and by science and technology. Overall, there are more questionnaires from students in Bachelor's degrees (BA) compared to Master's degrees (MA). The target number of surveys was 140 per area for Bachelor's degrees and 80 per area for Master's degrees. There are more answers from the curriculum of humanities due to larger class sizes, notably in language and educational programs. Enrollment targets were largely met, except for social, economic, and legal Master's degrees, where 66 surveys were collected.

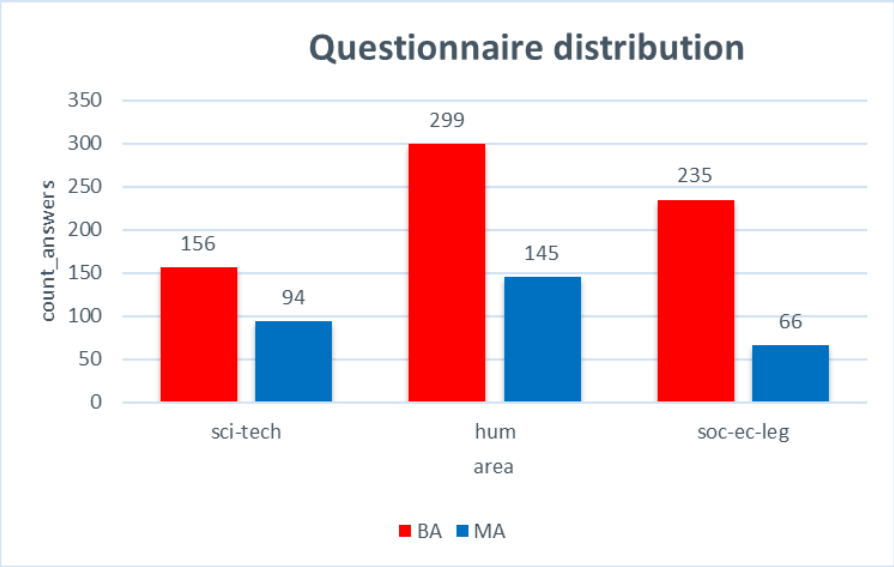

Figure 1
Questionnaire distribution by area and level of studies.

The survey also included questions about respondents' perception of the English language, namely: "*Quanto è importante per te conoscere l'inglese su una scala da 1 a 10?*" [How important is it for you to know English on a scale from 1 to 10?] and "*Quanto ti piace la lingua inglese da 1 a 10*? [How much do you like English on a scale from 1 to 10]. Figures 2 and 3 are stacked bar

charts representing the participants' answers; the students were to indicate values on a Likert scale from 1 to 10, where 1 corresponds to not important or not liked and 10 to very important or very much liked.

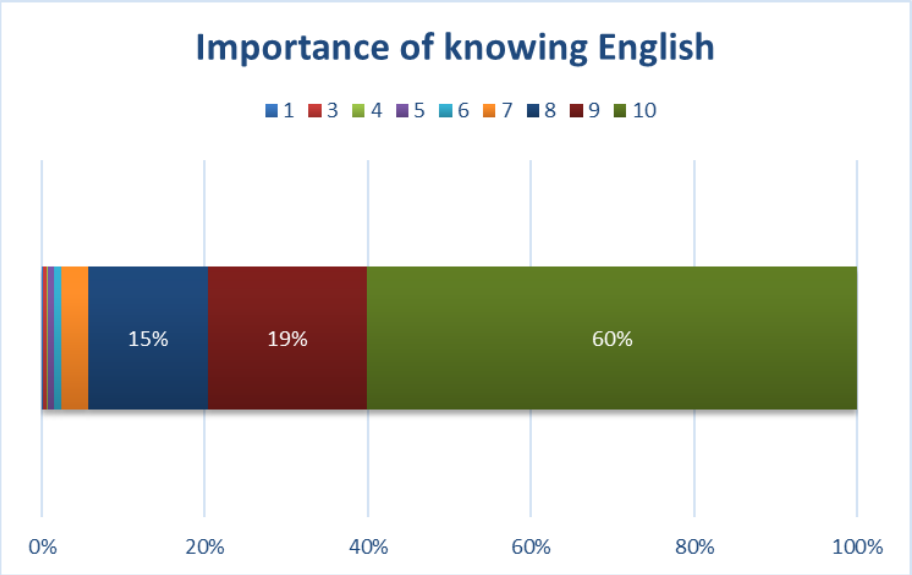

Figure 2
Importance of knowing English
(1= not important at all; 10=very important).

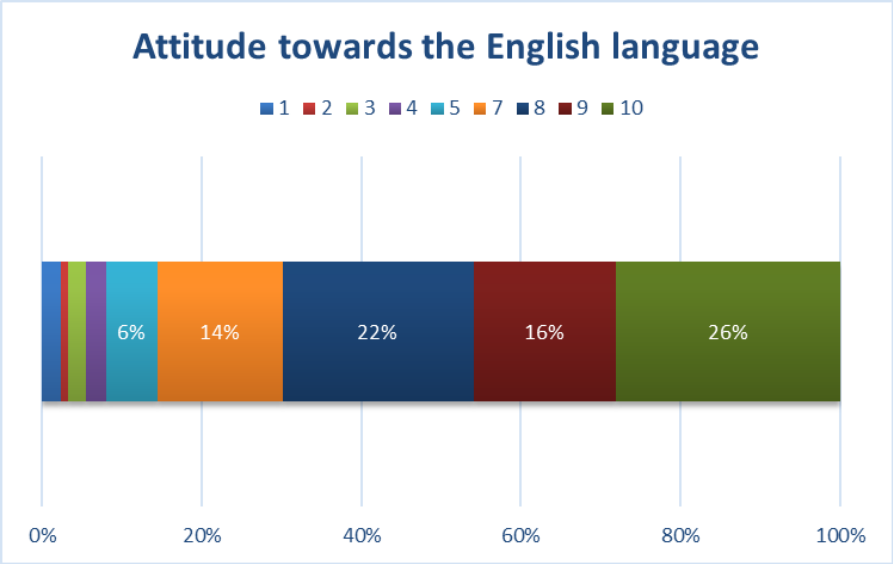

Figure 3
Attitude towards the English language
(1= I do not like it; 10= I like it very much).

From Figure 2 it can be seen that the perception that English is important is widespread (10 out of 10 for 60% of the respondents). The attitude towards the

English language represented in Figure 3 is not as positive as the perception of its importance, and it is more varied. Overall, it remains towards the high-end of the Likert scale, since 64% of answers about the attitude towards English are between 8 and 10, with 10 corresponding to 'I like it [English] very much'. The self-assessed level of English is represented in Figure 4.

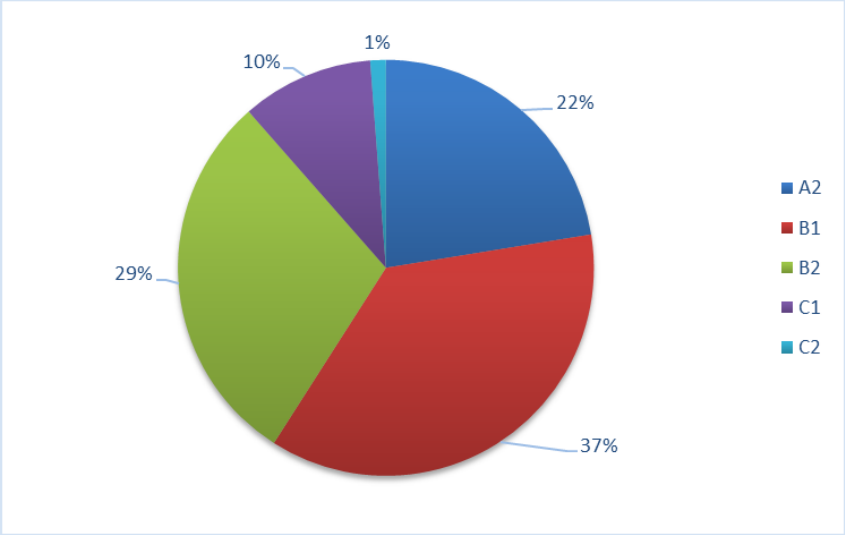

Figure 4
Self-assessed level of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2020).

The majority of students consider their level of English as an intermediate level, corresponding to B1-B2 (66%), a minority of respondents describe their level as advanced (11%) and 22% of students think they have an elementary level (A2).

5.2. Exposure to YouTube

When students were asked about the use of YouTube in English, 56% of them answered that they use YouTube in English. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the frequency and length of YouTube use. Figure 5 does not highlight a specific trend in the frequency of use of YouTube, because the answers are evenly distributed among the options 'sometimes' (30%), 'often' (23%) and 'very often' (31%), whereas only a minority of respondents chose 'rarely' (10%). As far as the length of use of YouTube in English is concerned, when on YouTube 57% of respondents watch videos for less than one hour, while 42% for longer time. When asked about the use of subtitles, 46% of students answered that they use English subtitles, 28% that they add Italian subtitles and 26% that they watch English contents without subtitles.

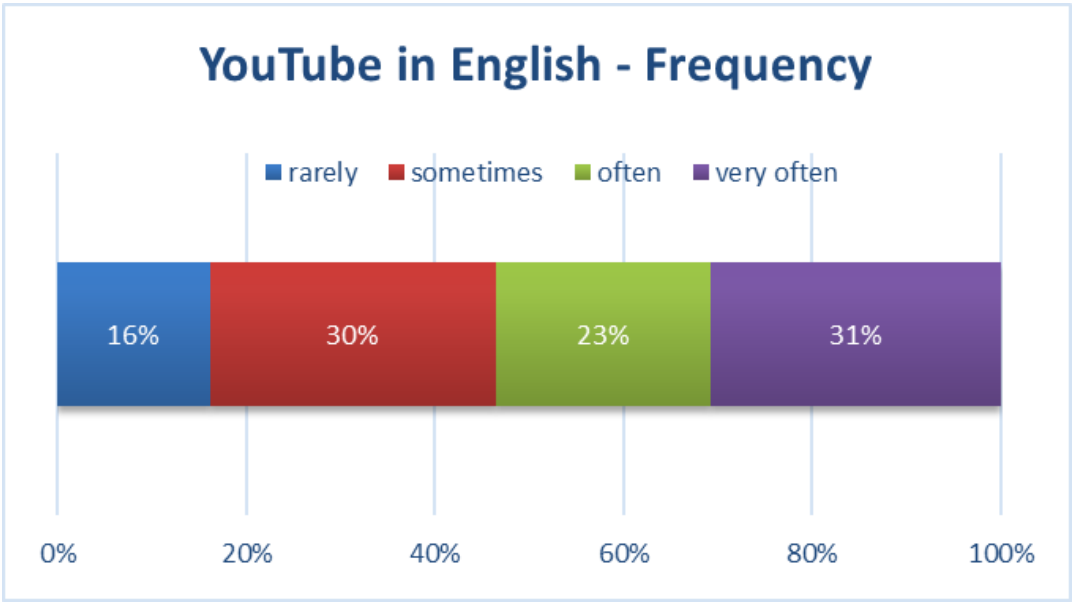

Figure 5
Frequency of use of YouTube in English.

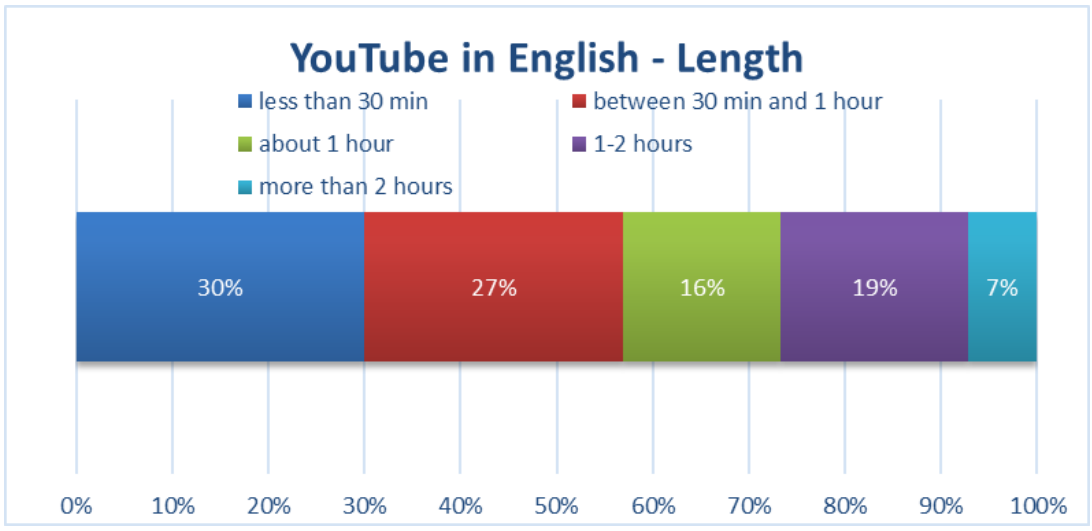

Figure 6
Length of use of YouTube in English.

The sorted bar chart shown in Figure 7 shows the types of contents respondents access on YouTube, represented as the count of answers from the highest to the lowest. Respondents had a pre-defined list of YouTube content types and could choose more than one option. The most popular YouTube contents are music videos (384), tutorials (330) and film/TV scenes (320).

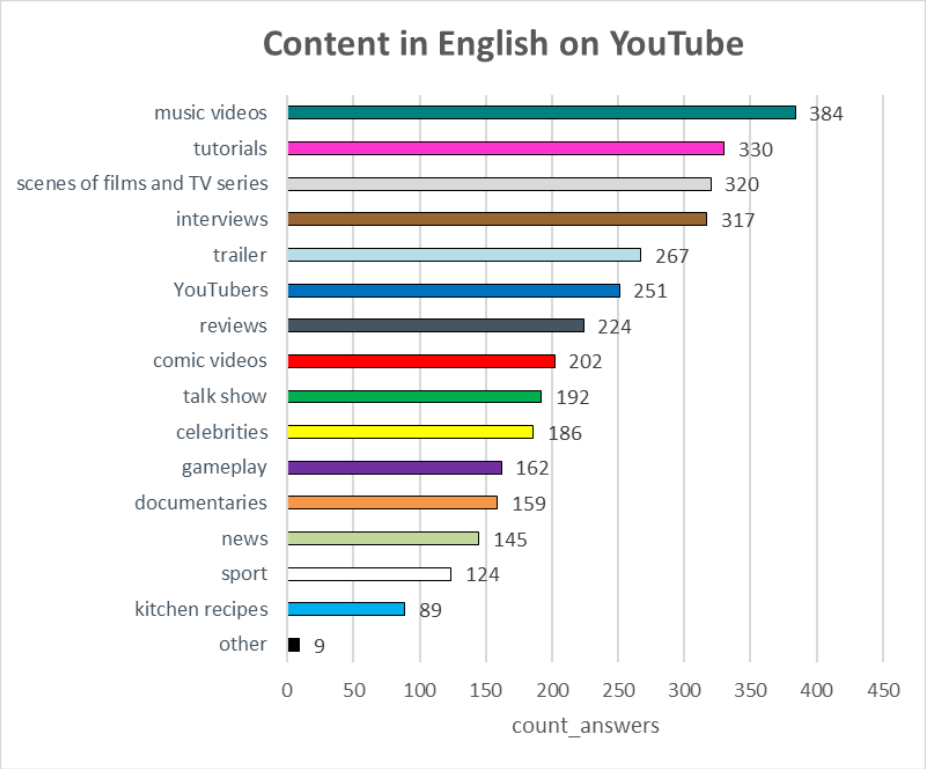

Figure 7
Types of content in English accessed through YouTube videos.

As far as the device with which students access videos is concerned, respondents had to indicate one or more devices among television, computer, tablet and smartphone. Smartphone was the most common answer (464), followed by computer (343), tablet (130) and television (74).

5.3. Exposure to the Internet

Data about Internet English usage differ from those of YouTube. In fact, most students (65%) reported no usage of the Internet in English. The use of the Internet was surveyed with questions about a variety of contents (see Section 4).

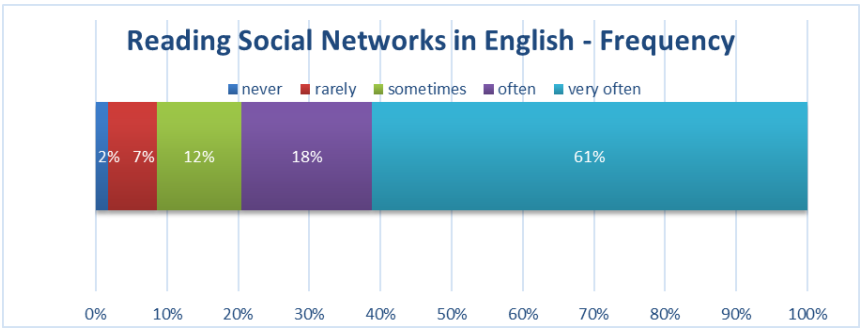

Figure 8
Frequency of reading content in English on social networks.

Reading posts on social networks in English (see Figure 8) is an activity which is part of respondents' daily routine since the majority of answers (61%) were that they do it 'very often' (corresponding to every day or almost every day).

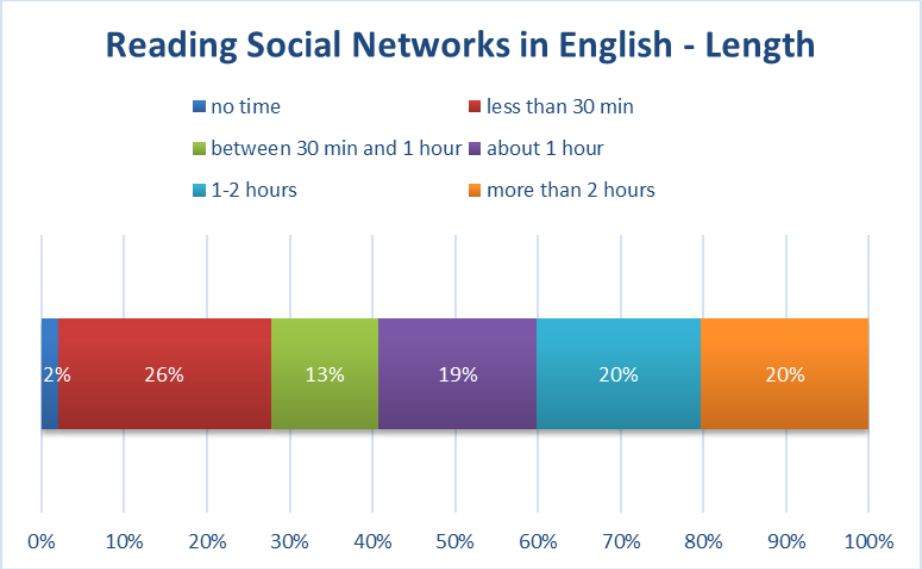

Figure 9
Length of time dedicated to reading content in English on social networks.

The length of time devoted to reading content in English on social networks (see Figure 9) is varied and evenly distributed among the different options.

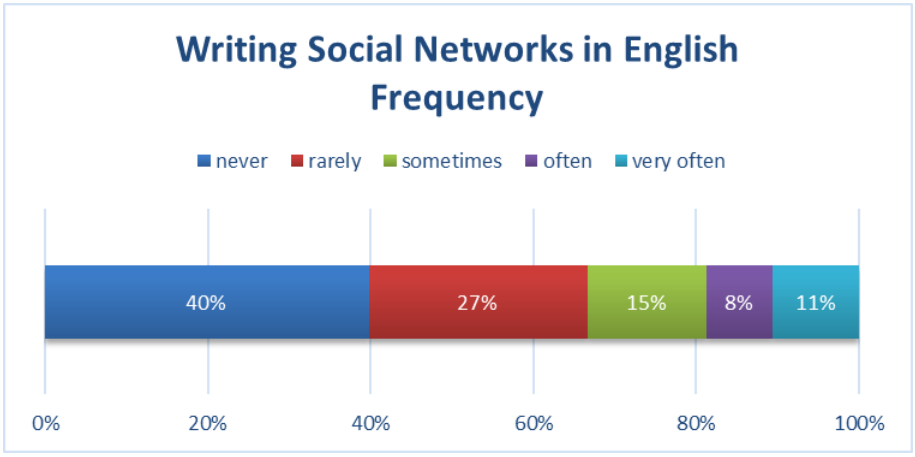

Figure 10
Frequency of writing content in English on social networks.

Writing content in English on social networks (see Figure 10) is not a habit for the majority of respondents, since 40% never do it and 27% do it rarely (which corresponds to once or twice a month).

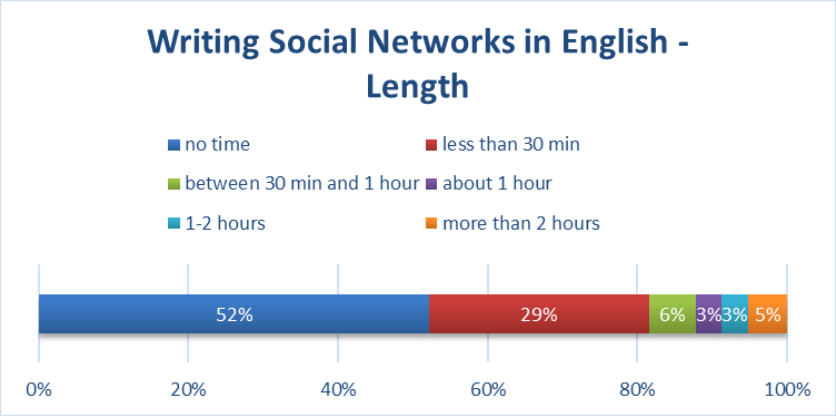

Figure 11
Length of time dedicated to writing content in English on social networks.

In line with the results about the frequency of writing content in English on social media, also the length of time confirms this is not an activity that respondents engage with to any considerable extent. From Figure 11 it can be seen that 52% of those who access the Internet in English devote no time to writing in English on social media.

Respondents had a pre-defined list of social networks and could choose more than one option. Commonly used social media platforms in English include Instagram (307 answers), TikTok (155) and Facebook (120), followed by Twitter (113), Pinterest (104), Tumblr (28) and other social media (20) (see Figure 12). Among other social media, 16 students out of 20 mentioned Reddit.

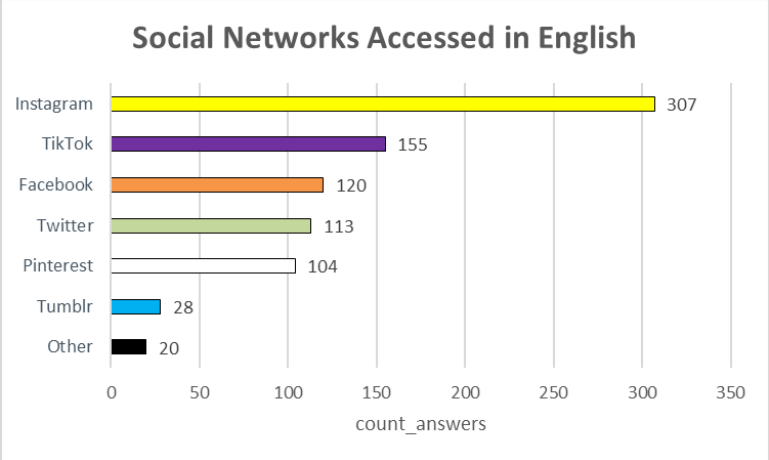

Figure 12
Social networks accessed in English by respondents.

When asked about the proportion of English content they access on social networks, 41% of respondents said 75%, 37% reported half, and 17% indicated a quarter. Furthermore, 2% of the students access no content in English while 4% all the content in English.

Figures 13-17 display the data collected for blogs and forums.

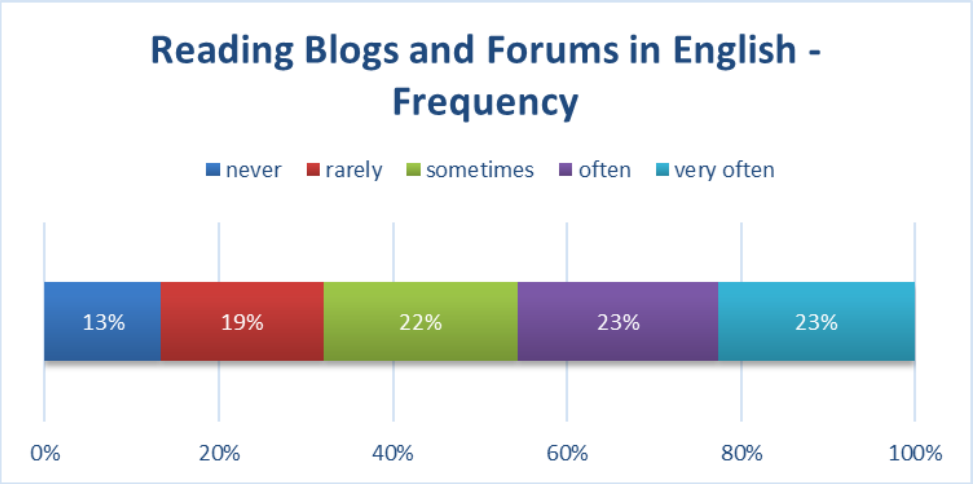

Figure 13
Frequency of reading content in English on blogs and forums.

The frequency of reading content in English on blogs and forums is varied and evenly distributed among the different options.

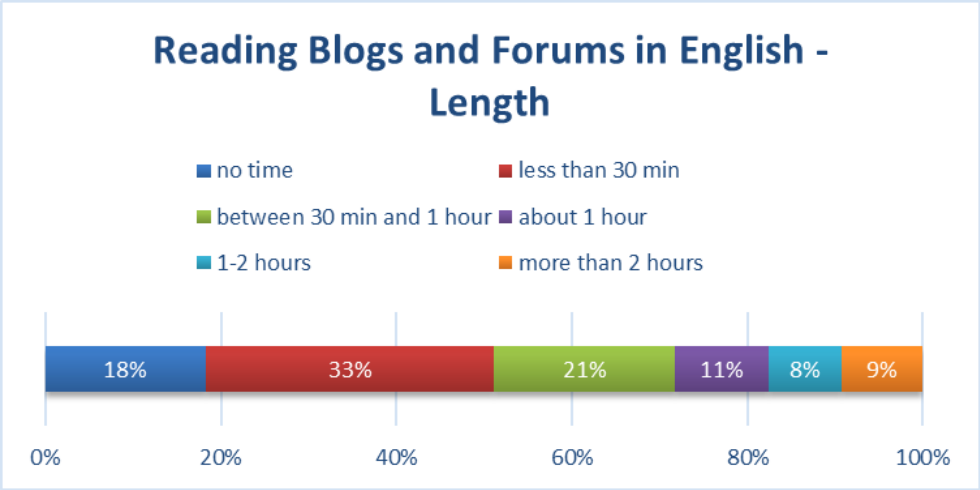

Figure 14
Length of time dedicated to reading blogs and forums in English.

Also for the length of time devoted to reading blogs and forums there is no clear trend, even if for this question there were a few more answers corresponding to a duration shorter than 30 minutes (51%) rather than a longer duration of the activity (49%).

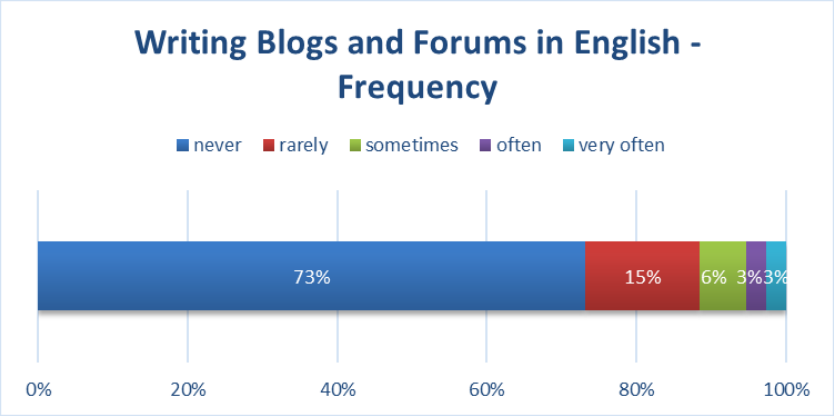

Figure 15
Frequency of writing content in English on blogs and forums.

Writing content in English on blogs and forums is an activity respondents do not generally do, in fact 73% answered that they never write in English on blogs and forums.

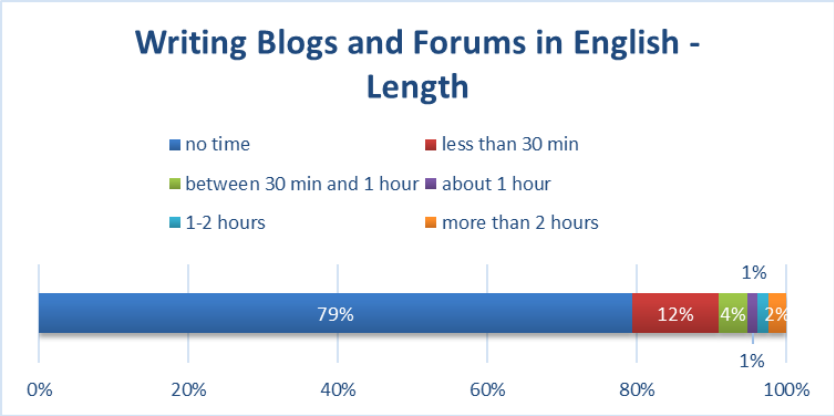

Figure 16
Length of time dedicated to writing content in English on blogs and forums.

In line with the results about the frequency of writing content in English on blogs and forums, also the length of time confirms this is not an activity that respondents generally do at all, as 79% of them devote no time to it. Not writing in English on blogs and forums is in line with what happens for social networks, but for blogs and forums this trend is more marked.

Respondents had a pre-defined list of topics of blogs and forums and could choose more than one option. The main topics respondents read about in blogs and forums in English are music (218 answers), cinema (172) and technology (143), followed by travels (131), books (130), gaming (114), grammar and English usage (112), beauty and fashion (87), sport (75), cooking (51) and cars/motorbikes (31) (see Figure 17).

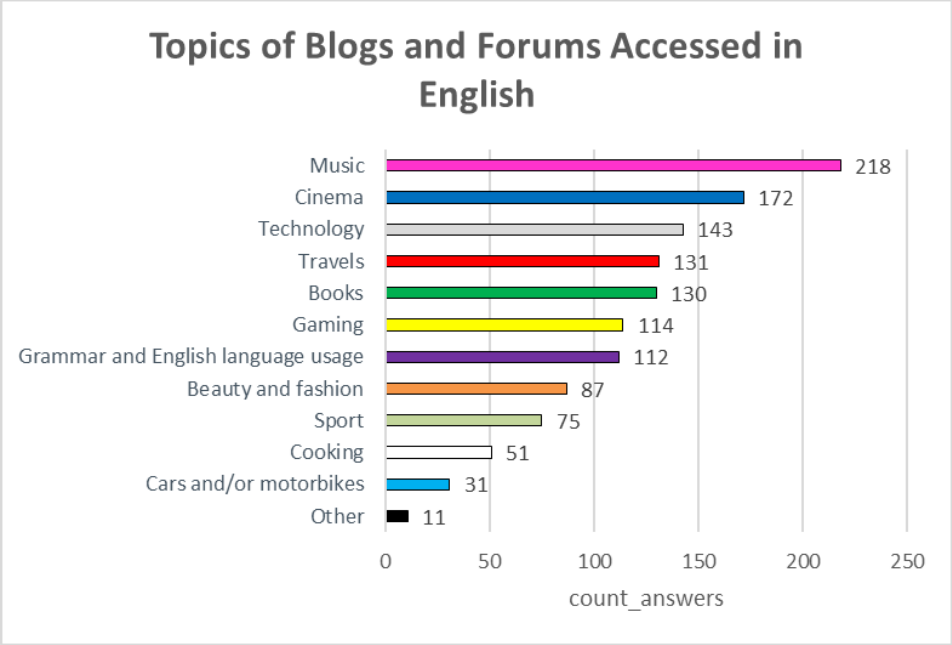

Figure 17
Topics of blogs and forums accessed by respondents.

Figures 18-20 display the data collected for the access to websites in English.

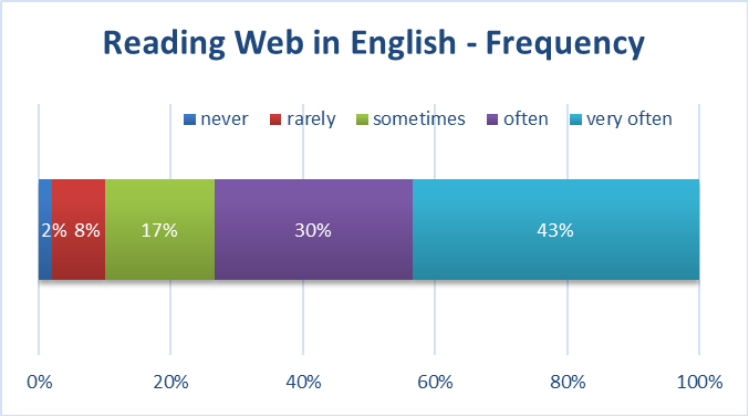

Figure 18
Frequency of reading Web content in English.

Not surprisingly, reading web content in English is something most respondents do either often (30%, corresponding to twice or three times a week) or very often (43%, corresponding to every day or almost every day).

When considering the length of time devoted to reading web content in English, from Figure 19 it can be seen that there were a variety of answers, with overall more respondents (56%) that spend relatively short time (less than one hour) reading online in English compared to those who do it for at least one hour (45%).

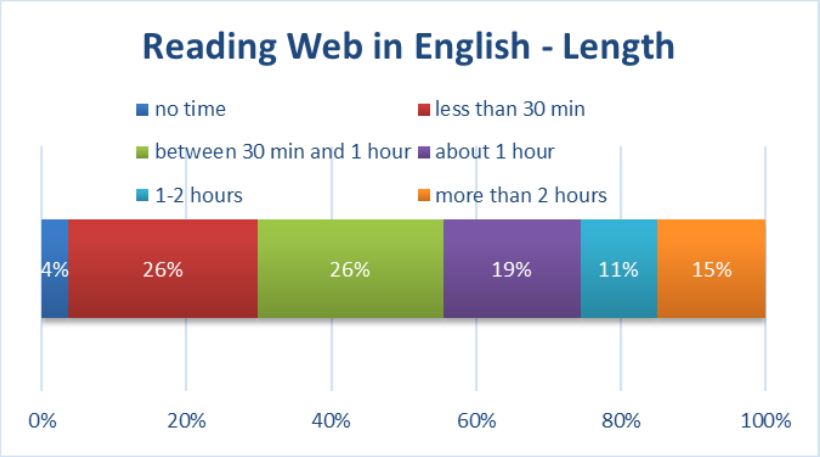

Figure 19
Length of time dedicated to reading Web content in English.

Respondents had a pre-defined list of web pages and could choose more than one option. The main websites respondents access in English are Wikipedia (275 answers), news and current affairs (223), English dictionaries (198), other wikis (118), pages about hobbies and cooking (82), other websites (22) (see Figure 20).

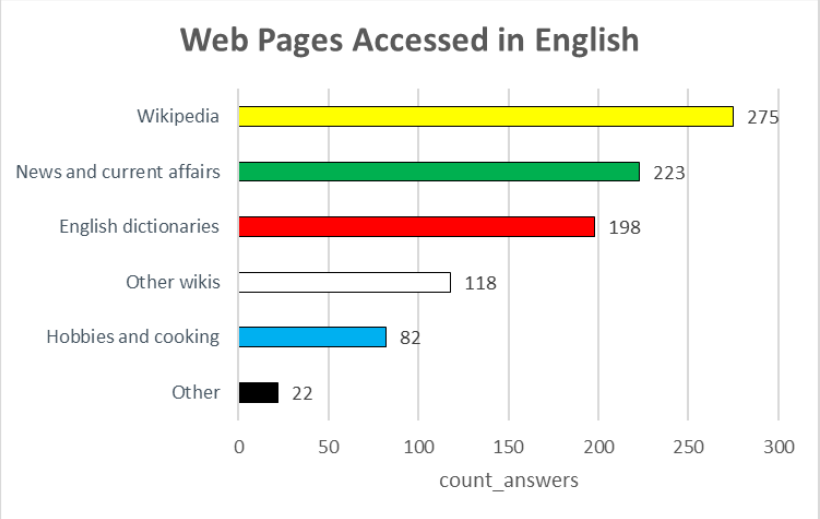

Figure 20
Web pages accessed by respondents.

Figures 21-28 display the data collected for the access to podcasts, radios, apps and e-commerce websites. Listening to podcasts in English is not very common among respondents, only 21% do it often (twice or three times a week) or very often (every day or almost every day). In line with the answers about the frequency of listening to podcasts, also the length of time shows that this is not a common activity. Respondents either do not spend time doing this activity (42%)

or they spend less than one hour (37%). Only a minority of respondents (16%) devote one hour or longer to listening to podcasts in English when they do so.

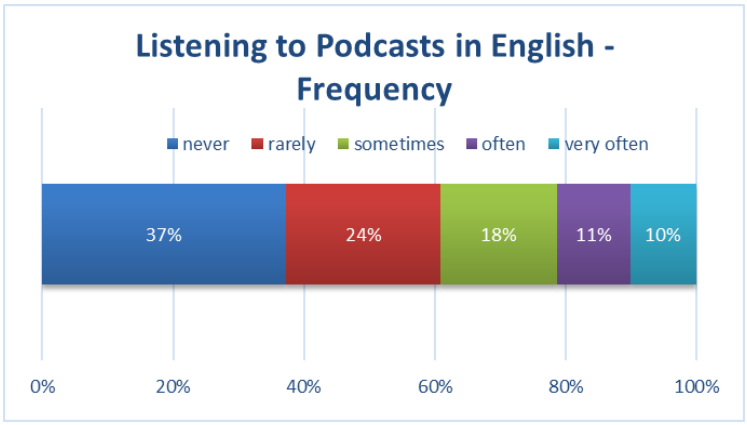

Figure 21
Frequency of listening to podcasts in English.

Figure 22
Length of time dedicated to listening to podcasts in English.

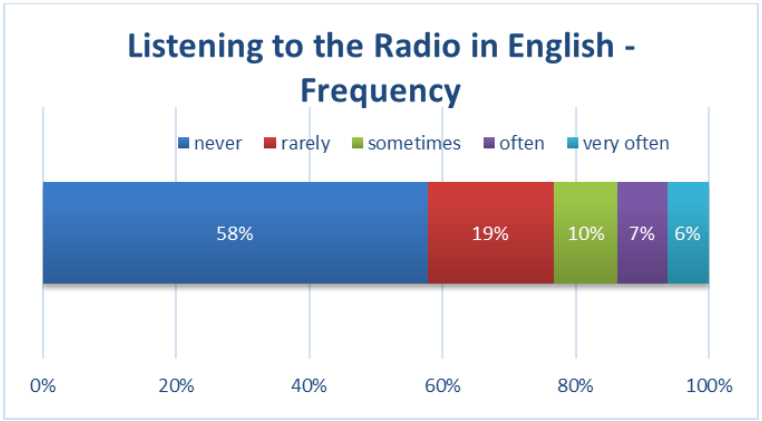

Figure 23
Frequency of listening to the radio in English.

Listening to the radio in English is even less common than listening to podcasts. In fact, 58% of respondents answered that they never do it.

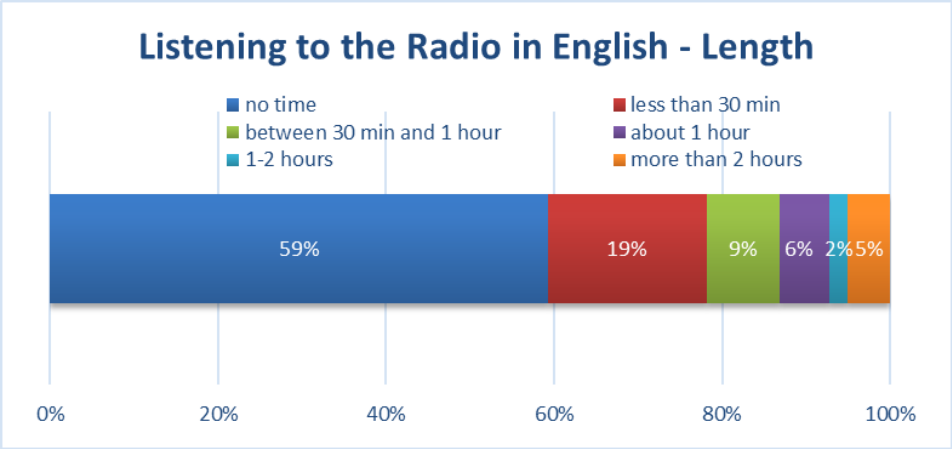

Figure 24
Length of time dedicated to listening to the radio in English.

In line with the results about the frequency of listening to the radio in English, also the length of time confirms this is not an activity that respondents do. The majority of them devote no time (59%) or less than 30 minutes (19%) to it. Overall, respondents do not listen to audio only contents online and those who do it prefer podcasts to the radio.

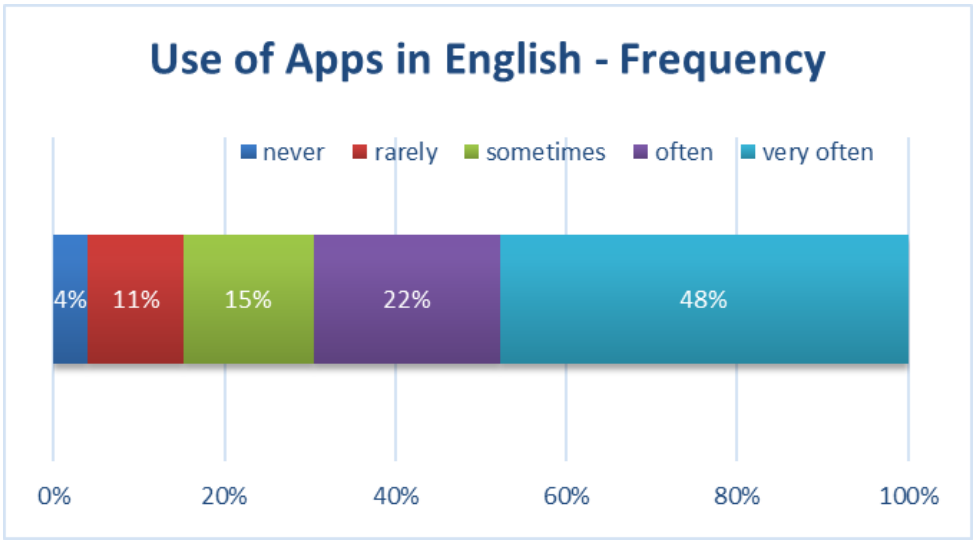

Figure 25
Frequency of use of apps in English.

Most respondents (96%) use apps in English and many (48%) use them very often, that is every day or almost every day. Figure 25 shows that using apps as an activity is clearly a habit, but from Figure 26, concerning the length of

time spent on apps in English, no clear trend stands out about its duration, since answers are scattered.

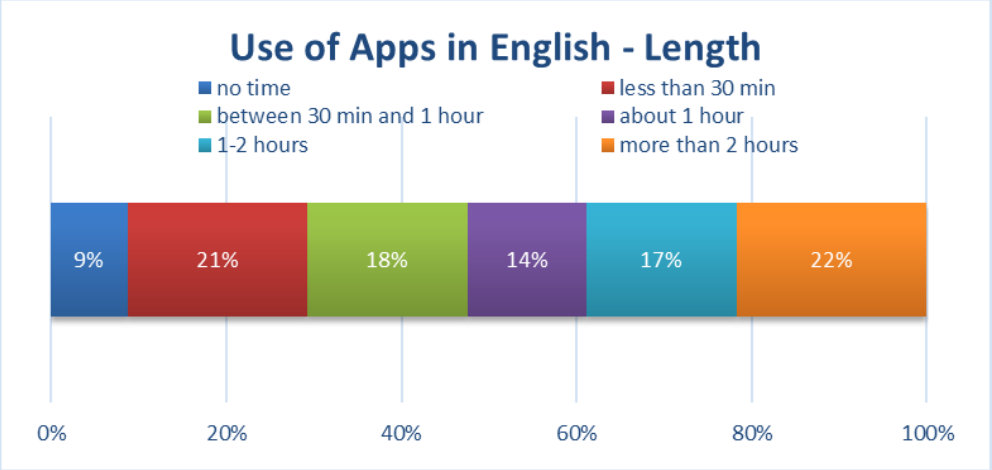

Figure 26
Length of time dedicated to the use of apps in English.

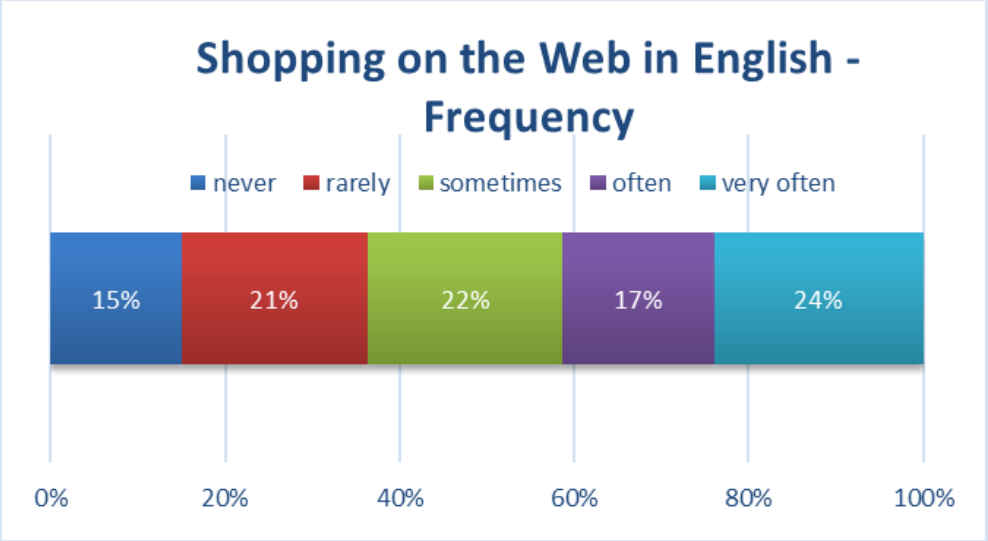

Figure 27
Frequency of use of e-commerce websites in English.

As Figure 27 shows, the frequency of use of e-commerce websites is variable among respondents, without major differences among the options.

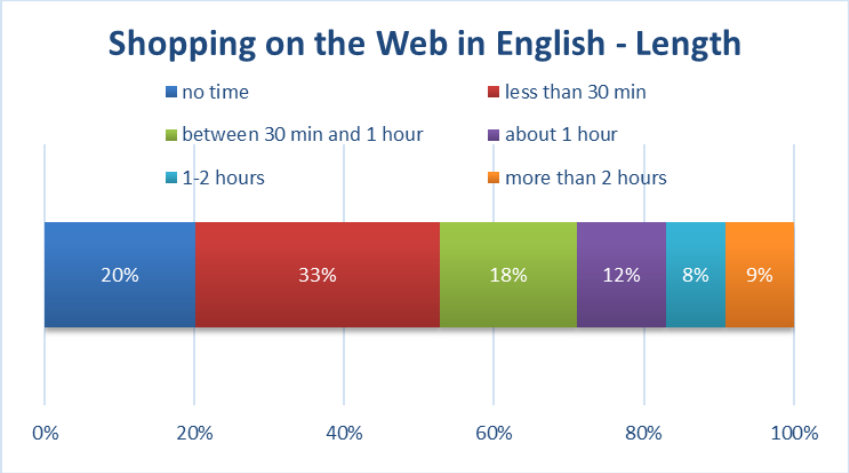

Figure 28
Length of time dedicated to the use of e-commerce websites in English.

Regarding the length of time spent shopping online illustrated in Figure 28, the most common answer (33%) was that respondents spend less than 30 minutes doing this activity, with 20% who do not spend time shopping online and 29% who spend one hour or more on e-commerce websites when they shop online.

Another question about online activity was whether respondents interacted online with native English speakers or non-native English speakers. Interaction with people in English online takes place often (115 answers, 17%) and very often (76 answers, 11%) for a minority of students. And, as can be seen from Figure 29, interactions happen indifferently with native English speakers or non-native English speakers.

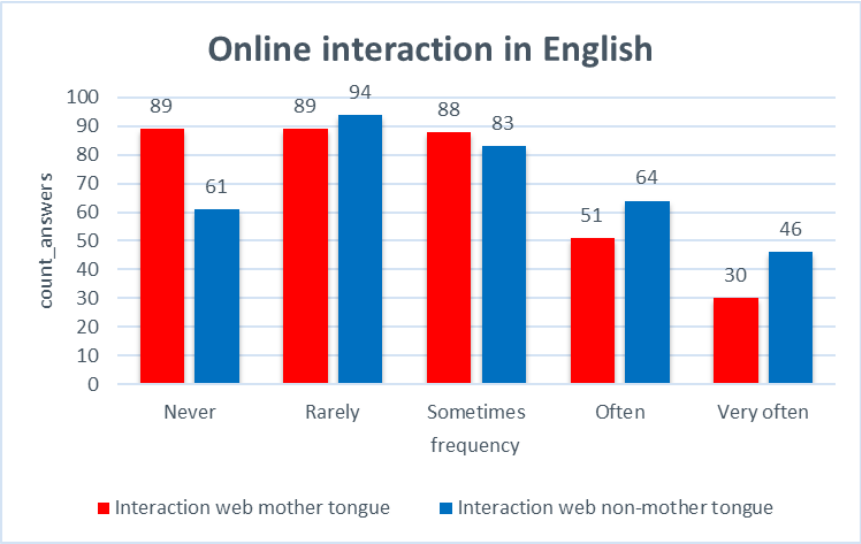

Figure 29
Interaction online in English with mother tongue and non-mother tongue speakers.

In the chart the red bars correspond to online interactions with English mother tongue speakers and the blue bars to interactions with non-native English speakers. They are paired by frequency, going from never to very often (see Section 4).

5.4. Influence of socio-cultural background on media exposure

The influence of social cultural background on media exposure was tested using the chi-squared test and the effect size Cramer's *V*. The levels of exposure to YouTube and to the Internet (outcome) were divided by a set of predictors connected with respondents' socio-cultural background: high school attended, parents' education, area of studies at university, perception of the importance of English, attitude towards English and self-assessed level of English. The results obtained with pair comparisons are shown in Table 1.

Predictor	$\chi 2$		p-value		Cramer's *V*	
	ExpLevelYT	ExpLevelNet	ExpLevelYT	ExpLevelNet	ExpLevelYT	ExpLevelNet
High school	54.31	35.96	6.008e-09*	1.788e-05*	0.15	0.12
Parents' education	8.45	8.44	0.08	0.08	0.05	0.05
Area of studies	10.38	6.28	0.03*	0.18	0.06	0.03
Importance of English	46.34	32.56	2.047e-07*	7.399e-05*	0.14	0.11
Liking of English	153.94	92.11	< 2.2e-16*	6.035e-12*	0.14	0.11
Self-assessed lev. of English	241.53	147.82	< 2.2e-16*	< 2.2e-16*	0.34	0.26

Table 1
Influence of socio-cultural background on media exposure.

The table shows the results of the chi-squared test divided by exposure to the two types of content analyzed: 'ExpLevelYT' is the exposure to YouTube in English and 'ExpLevelNet' is the exposure to the Internet in English. The chi-squared test for all the predictors gave a significant result with a small effect size, except for the self-assessed level of English, which had a moderate effect, and the predictors 'Parents' education' and 'Area of studies', which did not have a correlation with media exposure.

6. Discussion

The first research question was about respondents' habits in the use of YouTube and the Internet. According to the exposure indexes (see Section 4), over half of the respondents (56%) use YouTube in English and, among them, 54% are highly exposed. When considering YouTube frequency, a distribution of results across the various options can be observed. Instead, in the case of length, most students watch YouTube for a short period of time equal to less

than 30 minutes, or between 30 minutes and one hour per access. When accessing YouTube content in English, the majority of students use subtitles, mainly English subtitles (46%), but also Italian subtitles (28%).

The picture that emerges from the data about the use of YouTube is that this website is very popular among respondents for accessing videos in English, especially for a short time but very often. Moreover, students in this sample use subtitles most of the time, which can depend on their need for a written support to decode the audio but also to the availability of automatic English subtitles, provided by the platform.

In the case of the Internet, instead, only 35% of respondents use the Internet in English and, among them, only 22% are highly exposed. Among the various types of web content (see Paragraph 5.3) that students access in English, in this sample social media is very common: students read content on social media in English very often (61%). For length, there is more variability: some students spend a lot of time reading English content on social media (more than two hours) but others do not. Conversely, writing in English on social media is not a habit for respondents, since about half of them answered that they never write in English on social networks. In addition, the answers about the amount of English content on social networks confirm the pervasive presence of English online: 41% of respondents mentioned that 75% of the content they encounter on social media is in English and 37% declared that half of their social media content is in English. These answers are in line with the data about the frequency of reading English content on social media, to which 61% of answers were ‘very often’.

Conversely, reading blogs and forums is a less frequent activity in this sample, with diverse usage patterns and, as far as writing is concerned, 79% of students answered that they never write in blogs and forums. Moving on to reading English content on websites, the results indicate that it is common among students, with varying usage durations. Podcasts and online radio are never or rarely used. English apps are widely used by students, with varying durations. E-commerce site usage is varied, with 33% of respondents spending less than 30 minutes shopping online.

Data collected about Internet usage among the students of the University of Salento who took part in this study point out that accessing contents in English on the Web is much less common than watching videos in English on YouTube. In addition, students read contents in English mainly on social media and not on websites and do not engage in active language production, such as writing, either on social media or on blogs and forums. Wikipedia (275 answers) is the website that most respondents access in English and many students also access the websites of English dictionaries (198 answers). Considering these answers, reading English contents on websites seems to be an activity more related to studying than to leisure. Audio-only input, such as radios and podcasts, were

chosen by a minority of respondents (see Paragraph 5.3), who prefer using audiovisual materials, which they can easily find on YouTube.

The second research question was about whether students' attitude towards English and self-assessed level of English influence their use of media in English. The answer is yes for both predictors. The perception that students have of the importance of English has a significant impact and a small effect size on their access to media in English ($p < 0.05$, $V = 0.14$ and $p < 0.05$, $V = 0.11$ for YouTube and the Internet respectively). When considering how much respondents like English, this trend is even stronger, especially for the use of YouTube, because the impact is significant and of moderate size. Higher proficiency and greater liking for the language correlate with increased exposure to both YouTube and Internet contents.

The third research question took socio-cultural background into consideration. In this case there are mixed results. The high school attended by respondents has a significant impact of small size, both in the level of exposure to YouTube and in the level of exposure to the Internet. Specifically, there is a larger share of highly exposed participants among those who attended a humanities, science or language high school (*licei*). Parents' level of education, instead, has no discernible effect on media exposure. In addition, the current area of university studies of respondents has a negligible influence on YouTube usage habits and no significant influence on the use of the Internet. Consistent patterns are observed across both YouTube and the Internet. Perceived importance and affinity for English have a positive correlation with media exposure. Self-assessed English proficiency significantly impacts media exposure. In summary, respondents predominantly engage in receptive rather than productive English activities, with a preference for audiovisual content, use of subtitles, and varied Internet usage patterns. Factors such as high school attended and language attitudes significantly impact media exposure.

7. Conclusion

The main trend observed in the data is that students are involved more in receptive (reading) than productive (writing) activities in English online. These findings are in keeping with what was observed by Kusyk (2017) and Krüger (2023) in France, Germany and Switzerland and are much as one would have expected since receptive activities are more passive and, therefore, simpler compared to productive language activities. As Pavesi and Ghia (2020) pointed out, the replication of the same trend implies that students' habits do not depend on nationality or source culture. This finding could be explained by the ever growing pervasive availability of the Internet connection and of free online contents in English, which gives students plenty of opportunities to engage in receptive activities in English.

The role of receptive activities is essential to develop the language skills needed also for productive activities. Students access YouTube videos in English with subtitles much more than other web contents, showing a preference for audio-visual material over text-only material, which is in line with Sockett's (2014) findings.

Knowing that students usually read and listen to authentic English contents is useful for trainers to decide which activities they should focus more on in class and which ones can be assigned as self-study. On the basis of these findings, students would be comfortable with looking up contents online or doing reading and listening exercises as self-study. More guidance may be needed for speaking and writing, which could be planned more often as class activities than as self-study.

When looking at the participants' socio-cultural background, results do not show a significant influence of parents' education over English media exposure. This is not in line with Krüger's (2023) study, where there was an impact of participants' socio-cultural status on exposure, since students coming from families having a higher socio-economic status had an overall wider exposure to media in English. Even if they do not completely overlap, a higher socio-economic status is often associated with a higher level of education. The reason for the different patterns observed in Krüger and in this study could be that the respondents of this study are young adults, therefore older than Krüger's participants, who were adolescents. Older participants are likely to be more autonomous in the choice of the contents they access online, irrespective of their family background.

A promising research path to follow for the future is clarifying the connection between media exposure, self-assessed level of English and the attitude towards the English language: are students with a higher language level or liking of English more likely to access English media, or is it by accessing English media that students improve their level and like English more? A mixed-method approach, including both quantitative and qualitative data, is needed to answer this interesting question.

Bionote: Serena Ghiselli is a junior assistant professor at the Department of Interpreting and Translation at the University of Bologna. She worked as post-doctoral fellow at the same department and at the University of Salento, Lecce. Her research interests focus on cognitive interpreting studies, bilingualism, English language learning and corpus linguistics.

Author's address: serena.ghiselli3@unibo.it

Acknowledgements: This work was supported by the Italian Ministry for University and Research (PRIN project grant 2020NNJTW3_001).

References

Arnbjörnsdóttir B. and Ingvarsdóttir H. (Eds.) 2018, *Language Development across the Life Span*, Springer International Publishing, Cham.

Berns M., Claes M.-T. de Bot K. Evers R., Hasebrink U., Huibregtse I., Truchot C. and Wijst P. 2007, *English in Europe*, in Berns M., de Bot K. and Hasebrink U. (Eds.), *In the Presence of English: Media and European Youth*, Springer US, Boston, MA. eBook, pp. 15-42.

Bobbitt Z. 2023, *Statology*, in "Statology". https://www.statology.org/ (4.8.2023).

Council of Europe 2020, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume* (council of Europe Publishing), Strasbourg. https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching/16809ea0d4 (4.8.2023).

Czerkawski B. 2016, *Blending Formal and Informal Learning Networks for Online Learning*, in "The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning" 17 [3], pp.138-156.

Dressman M. 2020, *Introduction*, in Dressman M. and Sadler R.W. (Eds.), *The Handbook of Informal Language Learning*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, pp.1-12.

Kelley K. and Preacher K.J. 2012, *On Effect Size*, in "Psychological Methods" 17 [2], pp. 137-152.

Krüger M. 2023, *Media-Related Out-of-School Contact with English in Germany and Switzerland*, Springer, Wiesbaden.

Kusyk M. 2017, *The Development of Complexity, Accuracy and Fluency in L2 Written Production through Informal Participation in Online Activities*, in "CALICO Journal" 34 [1], pp. 75-96.

Kusyk M., Dressman M. and Sadler R.W. 2020, *Informal English Learning in France*, in Dressman M. and Sadler R.W. (Eds.), *The Handbook of Informal Language Learning*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Hoboken, pp. 333-348.

Muñoz C. and Elke P. (Eds.) 2020, *Language Learning from Multimodal Input – Studies in Second Language Acquisition* (Vol. 42), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Nation I.S.P. 1990, *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*, Newbury House, New York.

Pavesi M. and Ghia E. 2020, *Informal Contact with English – A case study of Italian postgraduate students*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa.

Pavesi M., Ghia E. and Ciabattoni T. 2023, *Profiling Informal Experience with English. An Instrument for Data Collection*, in "Lingue e Linguaggi" 59, pp. 303-32.

RStudio R.C.T. 2022, *R: A language and environment for statistical computing. R Foundation for Statistical Computing*. https://rstudio.com/

Sockett G. 2014, *The Online Informal Learning of English*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, Houndmills.

Tan E. 2013, *Informal learning on YouTube: Exploring digital literacy in independent online learning*, in "Learning, Media and Technology" 38 [4], pp. 463-477.

Tenny S. and Abdelgawad I. 2024, *Statistical Significance*, in *StatPearls*, StatPearls Publishing, Treasure Island, FL. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29083828/ (6.11.2024).

Toffoli D. and Sockett G. 2010, *How non-specialist students of English practice informal learning using web 2.0 tools*, in "ASp. La Revue Du GERAS" 58, pp. 125-144.

Università del Salento 2023, *Statistiche*. https://www.unisalento.it/statistiche (25.9.2024).

W3Techs 2023, *Usage Statistics and Market Share of Content Languages for Websites*. https://w3techs.com/technologies/overview/content_language (14.6.2023).

Weiss N.A. 2011, *Introductory Statistics*, 9th ed., Pearson, Boston.