Connecting English Wor(l)ds and Classroom Practices

Paola Vettorel

Abstract

This paper stems from a project realized in three primary schools in Italy. One of the project's aims was to raise pupils' awareness of the presence of English in their out-of-school environment, and of the plurality into which it has developed, not least in connection with their first-hand experiences in multicultural classes and of ELF in their daily life. The project was divided into different stages, including experiences of internationally-oriented communication via ELF in exchanges with other European classes. Primary teachers' awareness of their pupils' contacts with English in the outside-school environment and of attitudes towards the inclusion of Englishes in pedagogic practices were also explored in a follow-up phase. The paper deals with the activities aimed at fostering awareness of English in the linguistic environment, of the plurality of English(es) and of its lingua franca role, and explores how this approach can be applied to other educational contexts. Implications for syllabus and curriculum design and teacher education are also discussed.

Keywords: Lingua Franca; world Englishes; English for young learners; intercultural competence.

1. Introduction

Recent developments in research related to English as a Lingua Franca and, more generally, World Englishes have highlighted among other issues how the global spread of English has led to a differentiation and plurality of forms and usage, as well as of contexts and participants. Furthermore, English constitutes a consistent presence in the linguistic landscape and in the environment: younger generations in particular come into contact with varieties of English (Berns, de Bot, Hasebrink 2007; Seidlhofer 2007; Seidlhofer, Breiteneder, Pitzl 2006), and are often simultaneously EFL learners and ELF users (Seidlhofer 2011).

Two factors in particular, both closely connected to globalization, seem to have deeply affected our society, not least from a linguistic point of view: increased mobility and the role of Lingua Franca English has come to play. On the one hand, the increased mobility of people entails a closer contact among diverse languages and cultures. One of the most visible side effects of migration flows has been a modification in the composition of educational environments, which have become more and more multilingual; in Italy this has taken place above all in the last decade[1] (Ambroso and Lopriore 2012). Young people frequently experience encounters with otherness – linguistic as well as cultural - in their increasingly multicultural and multilingual school contexts. Together with migration flows, mobility for study, work and tourism, as well as contact in virtual environments, means that multilingual and multicultural contexts have become a common feature of communication in today's world. Indeed, young people "meet people from other cultures and origins in their own environment, and are as mobile as their parents. So, the encounter with otherness is not simply somewhere in their future, but also in their present" (Byram 2008: 79). Such experiences of diversity include languages, as well as different language varieties, not least in relation to English.

On the other hand, in mobility settings, participants very often belong to different lingua-cultures, and English generally works as the commonly shared lingua franca of interaction, conveying values related to many cultures rather than to just one (McKay 2002), particularly to those of the users engaged in communication. ELF interactions often display elements of communicative hybridity as a 'third' cultural (and linguistic) place is created in close connection with the interactants' lingua-cultural identities; this intercultural space is realised "in situ" each time (Firth 1996; Kramsch 1993; Baker 2012), in ways that are peculiar to each contextual setting (Hülmbauer 2009; Baker 2009).

Hence, it appears of primary relevance in ELT pedagogic practices to include opportunities to reflect upon the plurality into which English has developed and the diversified contexts it is

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[1] Cf. "Gli alunni stranieri nel sistema scolastico Italiano", MIUR http://hubmiur. pubblica.istruzione.it/web/ministero/index_pubblicazioni_13; see also Ambrosini and Molina 2004.

used in. This would, on the one hand, acquaint learners with the multifaceted variety of the Englishes they may encounter outside the classroom either in the linguistic landscape, in the media, in tourism or via the Internet, and, on the other, it would provide them with (reflection) tools to be (come) effective and language-aware ELF users.

1.1. Foreign language education and the primary school

One of the aims of foreign language (FL henceforth) education, particularly at the primary level, is to foster attitudes of curiosity and openness towards 'otherness', other codes and other cultures, thus promoting cultural understanding and tolerance. Young people's encounters with diversity, which occur in the first place in the classroom, can for instance be seen as a starting point to take into account and to value difference, both from a cultural and a linguistic point of view (Sifakis 2009). As Byram points out, young children

already have some knowledge (*savoirs*) about the practices of their own social groups, how to behave in specific situations, what is considered polite and what is not. They can be introduced to related practices in another language and culture and invited to think about similarities and differences, and what might be the problems and dysfunctions arising from one set of practices being inappropriately used in another language and environment. (Byram 2008: 82-3)

When looking at the Italian Primary school curriculum, both the 2007 and the 2012 *Indicazioni Nazionali* include in their recommendations the "discovery of stories and traditions of other countries" (MIUR 2007: 58; 2012: 37[2], my translation). Perspectives on a plurality of cultures, rather than one single reference target-culture model, appear thus to be taken into account. In the 2012 document we also read that "reflection activities" related to "conventions of usage in a given linguistic community" ought to be promoted, as well as on "similarities and differences between languages and cultures, in order to develop plurilingual awareness and intercultural sensitivity"

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[2] Retrievable at http://www.indire.it/indicazioni/templates/monitoraggio/dir_310707. pdf last accessed December 5, 2013.

(MIUR 2012: 37³, my translation). Hence, pedagogical approaches in the primary classroom appear to embrace the idea that the FL is a means to explore and discover a plurality of languages and cultures, in the interests of language and intercultural awareness. This applies to English above all, given its importance in Italian curricula, as elsewhere in Europe. Rather than being hegemonic and imposing presence, which displaces other languages in school curricula, English can in this perspective be seen as a means to discover other cultures, and to foster pluri-cultural competences (e.g. Seidlhofer 2007). By nurturing awareness of, and reflecting upon, the different roles that this language plays in today's mobile and interconnected world, pedagogic practices can therefore promote the language and cultural awareness skills that are highly relevant in communicative contexts via English, first of all in its Lingua Franca role.

2. The "ELF and ICC" project - Research design, participants and settings

This paper stems from a project realized in three primary schools in Italy (Vettorel 2010b, 2013a). The project was divided into different stages, and activities were carried out to raise pupils' awareness of the presence of English in their out-of-school environment and of the plurality of forms into which it has developed in connection with their first-hand experiences in multicultural classes and of ELF as part of mobility encounters. Primary teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of English*es* in pedagogic practices, as well as of the value of international exchanges in terms of (intercultural) communicative competence (ICC) and ELF experiences were also explored in a follow-up phase. In this paper, we will deal in particular with the Project activities aimed at promoting awareness of a) English in children's linguistic environments; b) of the plurality of English(es) and of its Lingua Franca role. We will also explore how this approach can be applied to other educational contexts.

The first part of the project was developed in school year 2009/10, with a team composed by myself and three primary teachers active

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³ Retrievable at http://hubmiur.pubblica.istruzione.it/alfresco/d/d/workspace/ SpacesStore/8afacbd3-04e7-4a65-9d75-cec3a38ec1aa/prot7734_12_all2.pdf, last accessed December 5, 2013.

in the Verona area. All actions and stages were jointly planned, and regular meetings were held in order to share ideas, problems, suggestions, and to adjust activities whenever necessary. This meant that, provided there was a general common methodological and theoretical framework of reference, the stages could be integrated into the curriculum and tailored to the specificities of each class. The methodological framework of the project was ethnographic (Allwright and Bailey 1991; Nunan 1992) within an Action Research perspective (Wallace 1998). Data gathered included teachers' journals, audio and video-recordings, pictures, materials produced by the pupils (individual, class and group), and a final questionnaire for teachers and pupils. Data was triangulated in order to take account of the different perspectives of the actors involved, in an overall qualitative approach.

The three educational settings in which the project was set presented complementary characteristics: six classes were involved – two, each from Grades 3-5 (i.e. ages eight, nine and ten) taught by three teachers – two teachers were *specialiste*[4] and one a class teacher. The number of pupils from a non-Italian ethnic background varied, totaling approximately 20% in one class and approx 92% (or 12 out of 13 pupils) in another[5]. On the whole, the classes involved can be said to represent typical primary school contexts, at least in Northern Italy[6].

The overall aim of the project was to foster awareness of the plurality of roles that the English language plays today, and to promote intercultural awareness and Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram 1997, 2008; Risager 2007) through internationally-oriented exchange activities with other European pupils. Within these general aims, a series of specific and distinct didactic stages were carried out; these are summarized in Table 1.

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[4] Within the Italian Primary School system *specialisti* teachers are qualified to teach English in different classes; they are now being increasingly substituted by *specializzati* who, after ad-hoc training courses, will teach English, as well as other subjects, in their classes; see Luise 2012.

[5] Pupils from Romania, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Morocco, and children from Rome.

[6] See note 1.

TABLE 1
Stages in the development of the ELF & ICC Project

Stages	Objectives	Time	Activities
Stage 1a.1 - In the presence of English	Foster awareness of the presence of English in the environment	2 lessons	– brainstorming session (whole class, pair work) – gathering of examples from the environment – examples organized thematically in posters / scrapbooks; "words we know" / "words we don't know" – reflection on activity – expansion: words known to parents / grandparents
Stage 1a.2 - Where do people speak English in the world?': Englishes, ELF	Foster awareness of the plurality of Englishes and ELF	2 lessons	– whole class: elicit on a world map areas where English is spoken as ENL, ESL and EFL – children colour areas on a world map – guided conversation with the whole class: which are your experiences with/of ELF? – personal drawings and reflection
Stage 1b - Cultural representations of the Anglophone world: what do I know?	Investigate knowledge about cultural representations – Anglophone countries	1/2 lessons	– whole class: brainstorming session about pupils' knowledge – gathering and assembling of pictures (the Anglophone world)
Stage 2 - Intercultural approach - internationally-oriented communication via English (Christmas, Trees)	Foster ICC, active use of English in ELF communicative contexts	several lessons	– Communicative activities with European partner classes via: letters, cards, chat and e-mails (eTwinning), web-conferences

In this paper, we will deal specifically with Stage 1 ("In the presence of English" and "Where do people speak English in the world: Englishes, ELF"), where the main aim was to foster awareness of

the presence of English in the pupils' out-of-school environment, of English*es* and English as a Lingua Franca.

To briefly summarize the following phases, Stage 1b ("What do I know about the culture of the English-speaking world?") aimed to investigate to what extent pupils were already familiar with cultural representations related to Anglophone countries. Children were asked to share their knowledge and to collect relevant pictures, which were then brought to class and organized in posters. The variety of areas the materials covered was quite impressive (e.g. tourist attractions in London, red phone boxes, the Royal Family, traditional English breakfasts, cf. Vettorel 2010b). The pictures gathered included mostly those 'factual' aspects that are generally presented in ELT materials and are often centered on "4 Fs" – foods, fairs, folklore and statistical facts (Kramsch 1991; Vettorel 2008, 2010a). The learners' familiarity with such representations, most probably deriving from the media, can indeed point to the need for a broader, intercultural approach to culture and civilization topics, such as those enacted in Stage 2. Activities were then planned around two main thematic areas, "Christmas traditions" and "Trees", which were identified by the team as potentially interesting in order to develop an intercultural approach to culture(s) via English. Besides being in line with the class curriculum, these broad areas appeared particularly suitable to the purpose of internationally-oriented communication with pupils of other lingua-cultures (Vettorel 2010b, 2013a).

2.1. Project activities – Stage 1

The following sections will illustrate the activities carried out in the first steps of the Project, that is, those specifically related to raising awareness of the presence of English in the pupils' environment and linguistic landscape at large, of the plurality of English*es* and of ELF.

2.1.1. Stage 1a: In the presence of English - English in the linguistic landscape: words I know/don't know

The first stage was further subdivided into two moments. In the first phase, after a brainstorming session in class, guided by

some questions (e.g. How much English do we know from the environment? Are there English words that have become part of our everyday vocabulary?), children were asked to reflect on the presence of English in their environment. With the help of some key-words (e.g. cinema/TV, music, fashion, health, means of transport, internet/computers, videogames/play-station, food, cartoons/newspapers), children worked in groups and thought of English lexical items commonly used in each of the aforementioned semantic fields, which were shared with the whole class. Pupils were then asked to observe their 'linguistic landscape' and collect words in English from their environment (the printed press in particular, but also other media) and to bring them to class. In the following lesson, words were arranged on posters or in scrapbooks, either according to the aforementioned lexical fields (see Figures 1 and 2), and/or by subdividing them into "Words I know" and "Words I don't know". Moments of guided reflection followed, drawing the pupils' attention to the sociolinguistic reasons and to the implications of their findings, that is, of how the spread of English is reflected in the linguistic landscape of non-English speaking countries, too. The word search activity continued in the following weeks and children enriched the posters and scrapbooks with new lexical items. Some words from other languages were also retrieved (e.g. Sinhalese, Romanian, Arabic), in particular by bilingual children whose families were of non-Italian origin, thus providing examples for further reflection.

The activities in the first stage of the Project contributed to raising the pupils' awareness of the high number of English words present in their environment, and of how many of these words were already familiar to them. In some cases, this came as a surprise both to the children and to their families, who generally actively participated in the collection activity. Reflection included a comparison on how the presence of English differs generationally (parents, grandparents), on the fact that at times older generations did not comprehend some of the words (and even found them 'funny'), and on the reasons for these sociolinguistic changes.

FIGURES 1-2
English words – scrapbook and poster
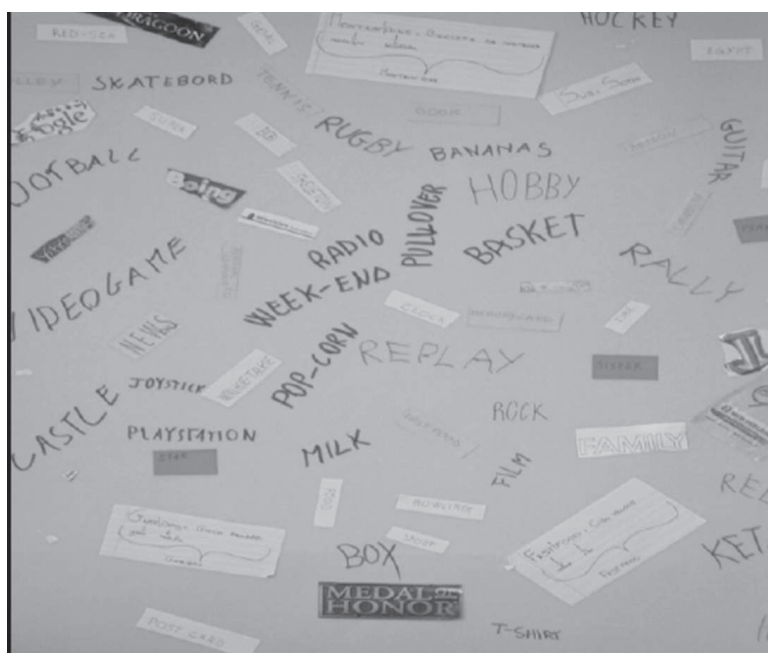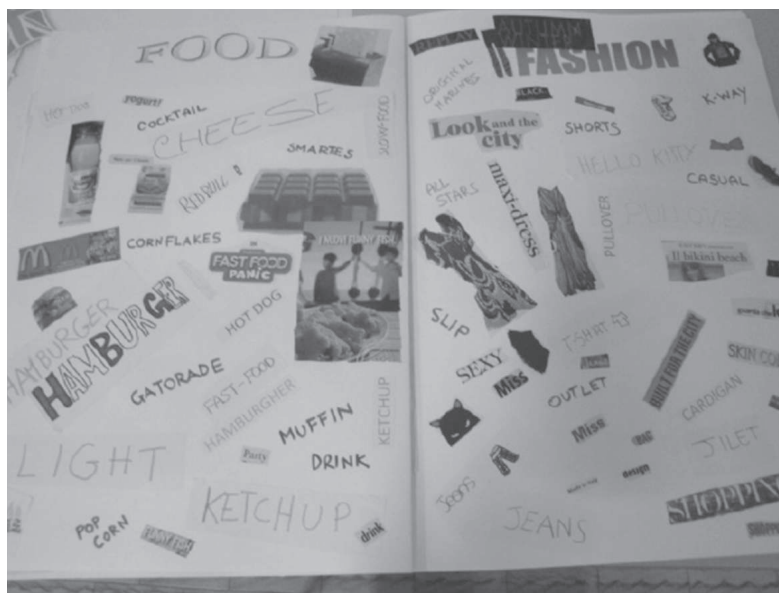
2.1.2. Step 1b: Where do people speak English in the world?': Englishes, ELF

The following step, closely connected with the first, aimed at investigating how aware pupils were of the different varieties of English in the world with reference to territories where it is spoken as a native (ENL), a second (ESL) and a foreign (EFL) language, as well as of its Lingua Franca role.

First of all, with the support of wall-charts, a globe and/or Google Earth children were guided to think of the areas where English is used as a mother tongue, a second or a foreign language. Many pupils, particularly in Grades 4 and 5, could appropriately identify these areas, not least drawing on their direct experiences (travelling, relatives, their countries of origin, previous knowledge). In this case too it was possible to connect class activities with the learners' direct experiences, particularly with those pupils who had previously attended classes in Outer Circle countries (e.g. India, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Ghana and other African countries). Children with school experiences in these areas reported on the role of English as an official language, and of the ways it mixes with local languages in more informal contexts; when talking about the languages spoken at home, their bilingual experiences clearly emerged as an asset (cf. Vettorel 2010b). Each child was then given a small world map, to be coloured differently according to the English-speaking areas as previously identified[7].

In close connection with the preceding activity, the next phase aimed at fostering awareness of the role English plays as a lingua franca, first of all drawing on the children's first-hand experiences. Through a guided conversation with the class, attention was drawn to the fact that English allows communication among people of different lingua-cultures, that is, on its role of Lingua Franca especially among non-native speakers. Pupils were asked to think of situations in which they used English to communicate in real-life, out-of-school contexts, such as with people they may have met in their environment, on holiday, etc. In one class picture cards and guidelines from the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounter*s (Council of Europe, 2009) were employed as initial input, giving way to reflection about settings where encounters with people of different

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[7] Naturally, given their younger age, in Grade 3 this activity had to be guided particularly as to locating the areas on the world map.

linguacultures may take place. Various contexts were mentioned by the children, including a GP's waiting room, holidays, airports, their parents using it for work, emigrant relatives, personal experiences in the territory (e.g. meeting tourists) or with a sponsored adoption child, and also in contexts related to previous Socrates projects.

Pupils were then invited to represent their experiences in drawings (see Figures 3 and 4), which were shared with the class.

FIGURES 3-4
ELF experiences
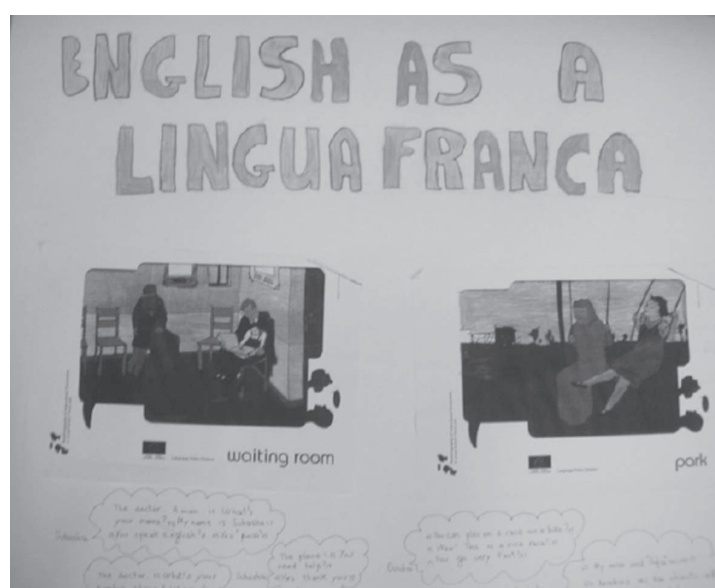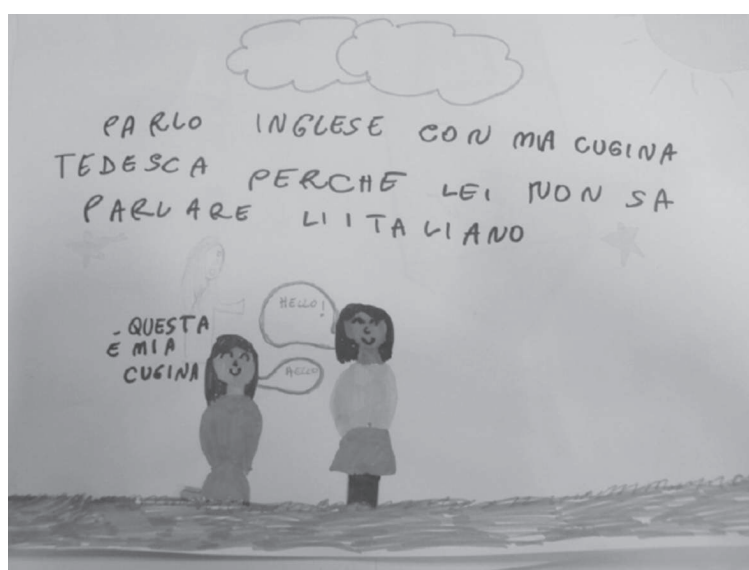
3.   Project evaluation

A final questionnaire was administered both to the teachers and to the students involved in the Project; results were then triangulated with other data (including teachers' diaries and students' questionnaires).

As for the activities taken into account in this paper, the overwhelming majority of children stated they appreciated them[8]; reasons provided included learning new things and new words, as well as their active involvement; searching for English words in their linguistic environment, and reflection on the roles that English plays in different contexts nowadays proved particularly popular[9] - that is, besides being a native language in Anglophone countries, the areas where it is spoken as a second language, and contexts where it is used as a lingua franca.

All teachers indicated "English words – In the presence of English" among the most appreciated and useful activities, followed by "Where do people speak English in the world? Englishes, ELF", "What I know about English culture". All teachers agreed on the fact that the project had provided learners with meaningful reflection opportunities, both in relation to the presence of English in the environment and to its plurality. This aspect also emerged in the follow-up study[10] which was aimed at investigating, among other issues, primary English teachers' perceptions of their pupils' contact with English in outside-school environments, their opinions about the inclusion of different varieties in classroom practices and the value of international exchanges. Findings suggest that teachers are well aware of their students' extended and manifold contact with English in the environment (cf. e.g. Enever 2011; see Lopriore in this volume), not least as ELF users, as well as of the fact that their students' (future) needs will include interaction with non-native speakers of English both in face-to-face and in

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[8] As for class a), 12 out of 13 pupils stated they liked *English words I know/don't know,* Where do people speak English in the world?': Englishes, ELF"; in class b) *English words I know/don't know* was ranked first by 43/54 participants, and in class c) by 59 out of 63 children.

[9] The great majority of children also answered positively as to the inclusion of different cultures in their ELT textbook (Class a*:* all (12); Class b: 42/54, class c 49/63, with 10 neutral and one negative).

[10] This included a questionnaire survey, individual interviews and a focus group.

online environments. The children's familiarity with the concept of variety and differences in their own mother-tongue, as well as out of encounters within the classroom was also pointed out: 39% teacher respondents reported in the questionnaire survey that pupils have contacts with non-native (Outer Circle) varieties of English in the school environment (Ambroso and Lopriore 2012). One of the teachers who took part in the Project highlighted the fact that during the activities children "immediately understood that there are so many varieties of languages in the world that of course languages present differences also 'inside'" (Vettorel 2013b). And indeed, as the project activities have shown, this variety represents an added value to foster awareness of the plurality of English*es* starting from the immediate school environment as well as, more generally, to the educational aim of promoting cultural understanding and tolerance.

4. Implications of the Project findings

The implications that the project stages outlined above can have for syllabus and curriculum design, as well as teacher education, are manifold. First, it would seem of primary importance to familiarise teachers with the sociolinguistic developments that English has undergone, so that Englishes and ELF-informed practices can be taken into account in school curricula (e.g. Seidlhofer 2011). Indeed, the three teachers involved in the project were familiar with research into World Englishes and ELF, either as they had attended university courses or out of personal interest. The wish (and need) to be acquainted with the sociolinguistic changes English has gone through over the last decades was also overtly mentioned by several informants in the follow-up phase (Vettorel 2013b).

A second relevant implication is the need to foster awareness of how the multifaceted presence and role played by English today goes hand in hand with the development of intercultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which can be promoted from an early age. Several didactic projects have been implemented in relation to ICC in primary schools (among others Vigneron 2001; Idea Project www.idea-project.org; Grzega and Schöner 2007; cf. also Edelhoff 2006). One significant example, in that it includes a focus on English linguistic variety, is the *Eigorian*

Project (Parmenter and Tomita 2001), which was carried out with 8-9 year-old children in Japan; one of the main aims was to "include communication with people whose native language is not English (international language perspective)" (p. 137), promoting awareness that different languages are part of our multilingual world, and that "people have their own language but use English to communicate with people from other countries: for example, a Japanese person and an Indian person" (teacher's comment, quoted in Parmenter and Tomita 2001: 142). Indirect awareness of different pronunciations was included, too, in the light that "there's not just American English but Indian English and Chinese English and so on" (p.?), hence concurrently promoting decentering and tolerance.

Similar projects could certainly be designed and adapted for other school-levels, too, with extra layers of complexity to suit older students. For instance, excellent examples of activities that include reflection on the roles of English in the linguistic landscape are provided by Sayer , whereby 'iconic' and 'innovative' uses of the language are explored with students "to investigate the social meanings of English in their communities" (Sayer 2010: 143). In a similar vein, Corbett (2010: 70-1) indicates how an "A-Z of signs in English" can be employed in class to the same aim. Furthermore, such approaches can see students directly involved in data gathering, as well as cooperating in data analysis and interpretation, making sense of the language they see around them and making "connections between the content of classroom lessons and the world beyond the classroom walls" (Sayer 2010: 153).

The same can be said regarding the different varieties and roles that English plays today: fostering students' sociolinguistic awareness of current developments in the English language can bear several benefits. First of all, as we have seen, exposure to different varieties is becoming common even for younger learners, both in their immediate school environment (multilingual and multicultural classes) and in out-of-school contexts (Enever 2011; see Lopriore in this volume). The activities developed in the project described here could be adapted to suit reflection on the part of older learners, both drawing on their first-hand experiences, of those of the people in their environment, as well as on relevant literary texts where applicable, as do the activities proposed by

Takagaki (2005) and Corbett (2003, 2010). Furthermore, the web offers valuable material that could be exploited in this perspective, also involving students in retrieving and sharing examples of language varieties, and of different contexts of use, which could constitute a springboard for reflection (cf. Matsuda 2012; Alsagoff *et al.* 2012). Moreover, developing awareness of such diversity can promote both communicative and intercultural skills which, as shown by ELF research, play a most relevant part in ELF communicative contexts. Knowledge and acknowledgement of these issues would contribute to (re)connect what goes on in the classroom with how English is actually experienced in the 'real' world. As Seidlhofer words it, "a reorientation of English away from the fascination with ENL and towards the cross-cultural role of ELF" (2004: 226) would make it possible to include in pedagogic practices aspects related to awareness of the changes in and with English, as well as the pluri/intercultural skills needed in current communication through English (cf. Seidlhofer 2011).

5. Concluding remarks

To sum up, throughout the project stages illustrated in this paper, learners were guided to develop awareness of the overall presence of English in their environment, as well as of the different roles it plays today, not least in connection with their first-hand experiences - within and outside school. The global spread of English has brought about unprecedented opportunities for contact with this language in its different manifestations, which have become a consistent presence in the linguistic environment. EFL learners are thus surrounded by myriads of opportunities to experience English beside and beyond the classroom, not least in the role of ELF users, in Italy as in other (European) countries (cf. e.g. Enever 2011; see Lopriore in this volume). It would seem short-sighted not to take account of this, and not to include in pedagogic practices moments aimed at fostering awareness of the sociolinguistic changes brought about by the spread of English. Familiarizing teachers in the first place with these issues could allow recognition of the importance of providing our students with tools to interpret these changes, and to thus become culturally sensitive, language-aware and effective (ELF) communicators.

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