The Sociocultural Dimension of ELF in the English Classroom: a Case Study on Web-Mediated Activities

Enrico Grazzi

Abstract
The aim of this paper is to report on a research project that regards the pedagogical implications of using English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) at high school. It demonstrates how web-mediated activities such as cooperative writing and fanfiction can bridge the gap between the scholastic dimension of English Language Teaching (ELT) and the reality of authentic communication situated in multilingual and multicultural contexts.
This study, which is essentially informed by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory (SCT), examines the controversial nature of ELF from a social constructionist theoretical perspective on second language learning (Lantolf 2000). The results of this research indicate that the use of ELF is not a hindrance to language learning and could well be incorporated into ELT as a valuable resource for a more effective communicative approach to English.
Keywords: ELF; sociocultural theory; fanfiction; web-mediated communication.

1. Theoretical framework

Research in the field of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has been inherently connected to studies in the broad areas of Applied Linguistics (AL) and English Language Teaching (ELT) ever since the unresolved academic controversy on the nature of English as a global language started in the early Eighties. At that time the primacy of Standard English (SE) was questioned by linguists who affirmed the legitimacy of non-standard varieties of English spoken by non-native speakers (NNSs) in the so-called *outer circle* and *expanding circle* countries (Kachru 1982), and the assumption of the native-speaker's (NS) ownership of English was finally challenged.

The impact of ELF studies on AL suggests that an alternative approach to ELT is advisable in key areas such as phonology, lexicogrammar

and discourse, which should no longer be exclusively dependent on the traditional "exonormative native speaker model" (Kirkpatrick 2007: 184ff). They should rather incorporate the uncodified forms that distinguish and characterize successful intercultural communication within and across the communities of L2-users around the world. By 'incorporate the uncodified forms', I essentially mean that typical ELF features should first of all be presented to the English learner as authentic and legitimate, instead of being stigmatized as errors on the basis of NS norms; secondly, that they should be taken as acceptable alternative options whenever students are engaged in authentic intercultural communication in a multilingual environment (e.g. on the Internet), provided their discourse is effective, i.e. intelligible to their interlocutors (both NSs and NNSs of English) and appropriate to the achievement of their pragmatic goals (Widdowson 2003). Referring to this performative use of ELF, Seidlhofer observes that:

ELF users too are seen to be languagers. They exploit the potential of the language, they are fully involved in the interactions, whether for work or for play. They are focused on the interactional and transactional purposes of the talk and on their interlocutors as people rather than on the linguistic code itself. (Seidlhofer 2011: 98)

This suggests that the blossoming of ELF should no longer be disregarded by ELT professionals as a defective form of *interlanguage*, but should be considered as the manifestation of a complex evolutionary process that is quite similar to the way all natural languages have been historically shaped and adapted by their speakers. Hence, languages are shared *symbolic mediational artifacts* (Lantolf and Thorne 2006) that respond to the users' ever-changing communicative needs. Influenced by Vološinov, Lantolf and Thorne describe this process as follows: "For speakers, what matters with regard to linguistic forms is not their stable and invariable identity across contexts of use, but their adaptability to the speaker's specific communicative intentions"(p. 11). Then, later in their book the two authors come to the important conclusion that:

With respect to symbolic artifacts, language activity, speaking and writing, is the primary, though not exclusive, mediational means humans deploy for thinking. [...] It is essential to keep in mind that languaging activity is not construed as the equivalent of thinking; rather it is a means of regulating the thinking process. (pp. 79f)

Hence, it seems reasonable to assume that the progressive differentiation of the lexicogrammar system of ELF from other varieties of NS English is embedded in a sociocultural process of change and adaptation that is *emergent* within the *glocal* dimension of today's intercultural communicative contexts. Indeed, this follows from what affirms:

The notion of Emergent Grammar is meant to suggest that structure, or regularity, comes out of discourse and is shaped by discourse as much as it shapes discourse in an on-going process. Grammar is hence not to be understood as a pre-requisite for discourse, a prior possession attributable in identical form to both speaker and hearer. Its forms are not fixed templates, but are negotiable in face-to-face interaction in ways that reflect the individual speakers' past experience of these forms, and their assessment of the present context, including especially their interlocutors, whose experiences and assessments may be quite different. (Hopper 1985: 5)

We may conclude that in order to understand the emergent nature of ELF grammar it is necessary to focus on the connection between its non-standard forms and the social relations they mediate in intercultural communicative contexts of use. In other words, the variability of ELF grammar largely depends on the interaction of the interlocutors' different sociolinguistic identities and their active participation in the negotiation of meanings via a second language that they simultaneously *internalize* (Lantolf and Thorne 2006) and help to *construct* through *usage* (Tomasello 2003). As Lantolf and Thorne explain:

We proposed that internalization occurs through imitation, which is not a mindless copying activity, but an intentional, complex, and potentially transformative process. It is a uniquely human activity that is implicated phylogenetically and neuropsychologically in language acquisition. [...] [I]mitation does not refer to the parroting behavior stereotypically associated with classical audiolingual pedagogy. Instead it is a potentially transformative process that entails selective attention resulting in reduction, expansion and repetition of social models. (Lantolf and Thorne 2006: 175ff)

In addition, Tomasello argues that in usage-based grammar:

Processes of grammaticalization and syntacticization are cultural-historical processes, not biological ones. Thus, it is a historical fact that the specific items and constructions of a given language are not invented all at once, but rather they emerge, evolve and accumulate modifications over

historical time as human beings use them with one another and adapt them to changing communicative circumstances. (Tomasello 2003: 13)

This is evidence that the reshaping of English, which is the result of its unprecedented spread within the outer and expanding circle countries, deserves serious consideration, since it may lead us to a deeper understanding of the underlying *processes of sociogenesis* (Tomasello 1999) that generate ELF.

1.1. ELF and the interlanguage hypothesis

Studies on ELF are intrinsically related to studies on ELT, due to the double nature of English: a) an increasingly important global language, and b) a foreign language that has become a requirement in the curricula of many countries' educational systems. Therefore, I would like to consider some of the pedagogical implications of this duality and question one of the pivotal concepts in applied linguistics and communicative language teaching: the so-called *interlanguage* hypothesis (Selinker 1972; Pit Corder 1981).

Considering the development of ELF from a sociocultural point of view has shown that the English language, on a par with any other language, is a social construct and that the NNSs' diverse sociolinguistic identities and backgrounds play an essential role in its making. This implies, though, that the NNSs' mother tongues are not alien to this process, but in fact represent a rich resource for successful L2-users. Seidlhofer observes that:

Learners of an additional language have previous experience of at least one other language, which they will quite naturally and inevitably draw upon. … This part of the learners' previous experience has to do with their sense of how language in general works. But they also bring with them the experience of their own language in particular. In a foreign language classroom there are always at least two languages present and there will always be the natural tendency to make the foreign language less foreign by relating it to the language that is familiar, in other words by translating. (Seidlhofer 2011: 188)

Seidlhofer's words imply that ELF is used as a *contact language*, whereby the English linguaculture and the NNSs' different linguacultures meet and inform each other by way of the NNSs' performance. Thus, transfer ought to be conceived of as both a communicative as well

as a learning strategy that is part of the constant dialogic mediation and adaptation taking place at all language levels (phonologic, lexicogrammar, discoursal and cultural), whereby successful NNSs *appropriate* English and construct their intercultural identity (Grazzi 2010). So, even though, technically speaking, ELF cannot be classified as a contact language (like full-fledged creole languages, for instance) but rather as an additional language, there are interesting similarities between the sociolinguistic processes (e.g. loan words, calques, code switching, grammatical replication, etc.) that characterize its development and that of contact languages.

Everything said thus far leads to the conclusion that it would be inherently wrong to categorize ELF as an *interlanguage*, firstly, because this definition originally referred to the individual student's process of learning EFL, without taking into consideration the intersubjective dimension of learning in schooling (i.e. social relationships within the English classroom); secondly, because the interlanguage paradigm presupposes that the learner's native tongue interferes with the acquisition of the L2 and may result in the fossilization of deviant forms. According to the interlanguage hypothesis, learning English consists in a progression between two opposite poles: the student's native tongue (L1) and the target language (TL) that conforms to an abstract NS's model. The intermediate stages between these two extremes constitute the "interlanguage continuum" (Pit Corder 1981: 90), which, if successful, eventually coincides with the prototypical NS's language.

Hence, the crux of the matter lies in what seems to be an irreconcilable dichotomy: on the one hand there are ELF varieties, whose creative innovations "are born of international contact among their NNSs" (Jenkins 2007: 17), as well as among NNSs and NSs, following a natural process. On the other hand, there is EFL, which aims at nativelike competence and admits to no deviations from NS codified norms. Nevertheless, my overall impression is that on an empirical level it is possible to find a convergence between these two mutually exclusive views, provided we replace the interlanguage hypothesis with sociocultural theory (SCT) in L2 pedagogy. Even though we know that in EFL contexts most official curricula and teaching materials (but above all, most non-native teachers and language learners) still take NS performance as their model (Jenkins 2007; Sifakis and Sougari 2010; Vettorel 2010), and even though the certification of language competencies takes NS-English as the

benchmark for the definition of graded proficiency standards[1], we should not forget that, on a pragmatic level, schooling and second language acquisition (SLA) are interconnected dynamic processes. These are characterized and co-determined by the unique combination of key contextual variables that pertain to each individual classroom. In this sense, each English classroom becomes a thriving *ecosystem* (van Lier 2004), which is not secluded from the world outside, and where EFL is inevitably adjusted by the learning community to suit its communicative needs and specific sociocultural profile.

Even if NSs' English provides an 'orientation' (Kohn 2011: 80) in EFL, it is the learner's socioculturally mediated construction of identity as a successful L2-user that defines their *agency* (Ahearn 2001), i.e. their capacity to interact within the pedagogical context of the English classroom. My contention, therefore, is that from a sociocultural point of view, EFL and ELF share the same conception of language as social action, and this explains their tendency to converge and be complementary in the speaker/ learner's performance inside and outside the learning environment. expresses quite a similar position when she says:

Learners of English as a foreign language assume the role of users of English as a lingua franca. As they move into contexts of use outside the classroom, EFL learners become ELF users. If this is so, then the very *process* of acquiring this resource is itself a valid and viable *objective*. Seidlhofer (2011: 187)

If Seidlhofer's conclusions are considered valid, I argue, they should have immediate pedagogical consequences in ELT, because the dichotomy between EFL and ELF is essentially transformed into a question of perspective in approaching the learners' use of English. SCT posits an alternative view to the traditional conflictual relationship between English as a school subject and English as an additional language for authentic communication, and the link between these two adjacent dimensions is the idea that language serves its speakers as a mediational tool in a learning environment as well as in the world of global communication. As Kirkpatrick suggests:

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[1] E.g. the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), Council of Europe.

In aiming to teach and learn English in ways that would allow for effective communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries the focus of the classroom moves from the acquisition of the norms associated with a standard model to a focus on learning linguistic features, cultural information and communicative strategies that will facilitate communication. (Kirkpatrick 2007: 194)

The logical implication of such a position is a wide-range renewal of educational goals and methodology in order to attune today's ELT practices to the unique status of English as the main lingua franca of today. Bringing ELF to school, therefore, would mean connecting the English classroom to the world, and that surely will be a major challenge for years to come.

In conclusion, the primary objective of my research project, which I will report on in the following sections, was two-fold: to design and implement innovative activities for the English classroom and to show ELT practitioners how it is possible to bridge the gap between the traditional way of teaching EFL, which exclusively follows the native-speaker model, and a more advanced approach to learning English in school that incorporates ELF.

2. Fieldwork: fanfiction and the use of ELF in the English classroom

This research is based on the assumption that despite the fact that most English syllabi follow either the communicative approach (CA) or task-based language teaching (TBLT) (Nunan 1991; Ellis 2003), learners rarely have the opportunity to use English for real communication within the institutional learning context of the English classroom. In fact, whenever CA and TBLT lack authentic communicative contexts of reference, learners fail to perceive English as a "cultural affordance" (Reed 1988, in van Lier 2004: 94) that can be internalized and externalized through meaning-making pragmatic activities. On the contrary, the Web provides access to a vast virtual space, open to authentic social interaction in a multicultural context that should be explored by teachers and students of English as an extension of their overall experiential environment.

This project, which is informed by Vygotsky's (1978) SCT, intends to" simulate an ELF-mediated setting, where several web-based cooperative assignments are carried out. It has a major pedagogical aim,

with two primary intentions: a) to exploit the high affordance of Internet-mediated social networking to provide students with a zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1978), whereby their performance could gradually improve via the help of their peers' mutual support and feedback; and b) to share this experience with high-school teachers of English, in order to give a practical example of how the implementation of ELF-mediated activities online could offer an alternative way of enhancing the learners' participation in cooperative practices.

Because Italian high school syllabuses often include the history of English literature, I thought that fanfiction could be the appropriate link between a more traditional study of literature and the new burgeoning approach to reading and writing brought about by the Internet. Nowadays, the technology called Web 2.0 provides a gamut of applications to facilitate the creation of groups of readers worldwide, whose love of literature has been the driving force and source of inspiration for those who, in turn, have become authors themselves. These fans appropriate their favourite novels either by interpolating new parts into them, or by changing their original stories, or even by writing sequels to them. So, thanks to the Internet, the typical relationship of an individual to content has been replaced by the participatory involvement of group members who contribute to the reinterpretation and progressive development of ideas. This has gradually given birth to a new genre called *fanfiction*, whereby creative writing has evolved into a social event that promotes intercultural communication. Hence, the intention of my work has been to devise pedagogical strategies to incorporate Web-mediated collaborative writing and fanfiction into ELT, to give students the chance to reach out to a real community of practice (Wenger 1998) (CoP) and use ELF to achieve the full potential of their collective intelligence.

2.1. Phase 1

I began my fieldwork in May 2009, when two fourth grade classes from two separate high schools in Rome joined my project (about forty students altogether). They were about to finish their school year and I decided to contact them right at that time because I intended to ask them to do some preliminary work during their summer holidays, so that they would be ready to carry out activities on web-mediated cooperative writing and fanfiction during the first

term of the following school year (2009/2010). Besides, I felt that it would be appropriate to select students who were going to attend their fifth and final year, as they were expected to reach the CEFR (Common European Framework) B1 (Threshold or Intermediate) level of competence in EFL. In this way, I assumed that the production of non-standard lexicogrammar forms in the learners' communicative activities would be more significant and revealing as regards the emergence of ELF in that particular context.

I asked the students to choose two books out of a reading list consisting of very popular novels and collections of short stories. The assignment for the students was to read these books during their summer holidays and meanwhile jot down notes of personal impressions and ideas (e.g. their emotional reactions to the stories, ideas for new episodes or changes in their plots, etc.). These notes were to be used the following school year to carry out their project-work on cooperative writing and fanfiction.

In October 2009 I met the classes and their teachers again, to establish our working plan. First of all, I introduced the applications that they were going to use to carry out the core activities of the project, namely: sharing their views on the books that they had read during the summer, and practicing cooperative writing and fanfiction online. The first application consisted in a social network provided by a website called aNobii[2], which is exclusively aimed at readers. Members of aNobii are allowed to create, share and explore booklists, add their personal book reviews, and start discussion groups on different themes, such as an author's work, a literary genre, a novel, a literary topic, etc. The second application was a *wiki*,[3] a tool whose most important feature is that it allows participants to share a number of texts and improve them progressively without losing the previous drafts. Moreover, using a function called 'History', it is possible to compare two or more versions of the same text and visualise all the changes that have been made.

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[2] aNobii (www.anobii.com) was created in Hong Kong in 2005. Today, aNobii is available in more than forty different languages, with almost 12 million books classified to date.

[3] Wikispaces (http://www.wikispaces.com, last accessed January 12, 2014) is a website that allows the creation of wikis. It is free for educational institutions.

2.1.1. Book reviews on aNobii

As regards the first core activity of the project (sharing book reviews), the two classes I had selected for my research were invited to join a reading group on aNobii that I had created specifically for them, called *English Learners' Community*[4]. The students had to fill their virtual bookshelf with all the books they had read in English over their high-school years, including those that they had read the previous summer. Then, using a facility that is provided by aNobii, each student was asked to write a short review in English of these titles, so that any other member of the social network who shared the same books on his/her personal virtual bookshelf could start an asynchronous discussion online and exchange views. In the end, the students involved in this research project became members of a vast online CoP. The fact that they started to receive feedback from other aNobii members who were not their classmates made web-mediated communication authentic and the use of ELF effective. This gave students a great sense of achievement that immediately reinforced their motivation to carry out their task. Therefore, I suggest that integrating this kind of social networking as a common practice in language education is highly advisable not only because it can stimulate the learners' communicative competence, but also because it may potentially extend their cultural horizons. Among the major advantages that working with aNobii can offer, I would like to mention a few crucial ones:
–   The improvement of learners' reading and writing skills.
–   The use of ELF for authentic communication within an international community of social networkers who share the same interests.
–   An approach to reading as a social event that promotes the horizontal sharing of ideas and experiences in a different way.
–   The discovery of new fields of potential interest to the student.
–   The promotion of reflective learning as a process of sociocultural awareness.

2.1.2. Cooperative writing and fanfiction on Wikispaces

I have already mentioned the case of fanfiction, a new genre that has inverted the traditional relationship between a work's author and its

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[4] http://www.anobii.com/groups/019afaf5fca06cd878/

readers. That is why I felt that the school should take advantage of the participatory attitude of the students as *digital natives* (Prensky 2001)[5]. As regards the second core activity of my research project (cooperative writing and fanfiction), during my organisational meeting with the classes I asked them, as the first step, to discuss the books they had read during the summertime to share their views and ideas on the possibility of using them as a starting point for their cooperative writing task. Later, when the discussion was over, I told the students to choose the two books that they liked best. They selected two books that were also part of the syllabus for the school-leaving examination, that year: Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Joyce's short story *Eveline*, from *Dubliners*. The learners' participation in the project was completely voluntary, in order to make their motivation as free as possible.

The following step was to create our wiki on Wikispaces, which I called *Cooperative Creative Writing and ELF*[6]. Once the students and their teachers had joined it, our activities could start.

The wiki contained five thematic *pages* that corresponded to five different assignments. The first four were about Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

1. *If the picture could speak...* Here the students had to change the original narrator of the story and write brand new passages from the point of view of Dorian's picture.

2. *A new preface...* Here the students had to create an alternative preface to Wilde's novel.

3. *A new ending...* Here the students had to write a different conclusion to the story.

4. *The pact with the devil...* Here the students had to rewrite the episode of Dorian putting a spell on his own portrait.

The fifth thematic page, instead, was about *Eveline*, Joyce's famous short story from *Dubliners*:

5. *Eveline. A different ending...* Here the students had to create an alternative dénouement.

Working as a CoP, the students could then write and share stories cooperatively, and improve them through their reciprocal advice and

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[5] Prensky has defined *digital natives* those people who were born at the turn of the 21st century and grew up interacting with digital technologies.

[6] http://collaborative-writing-elf.wikispaces.com/ last accessed January 12, 2014.

feedback. This had rippling effects that turned creative writing into a social event that in turn fostered language improvement as well. In addition, the use of a facility provided by the wiki called *History* favoured the creation of a ZPD (Lantolf and Thorne 2006; van Lier 2004; Vygotsky 1978), as learners had the chance to compare at any time the different drafts of each text that they had produced and reflect on the dynamics that had been activated within their group, with a vision towards even more challenging accomplishments. This particular kind of language check, which was appropriately guided by their teachers, was able to help the learners focus on language learning as a process of sociocultural awareness and promoted a beneficial reflective attitude.

2.2. Phase 2: Further developments

This section describes the follow-up to my research project, which took place during the school year 2011-2012 when three new fifth grade high-school classes and one fourth grade class (about eighty students altogether), from three different Italian cities, namely Rome, Palermo and Messina, got involved. Our work was entirely dedicated to cooperative writing and fanfiction and the students interacted through a new wiki hosted on Wikispaces[7].

My aim was once again to connect the English classroom to the wide CoP that is involved with fanfiction online, in order to turn learners into social networkers who use ELF as an additional language for authentic Web-mediated communication. As regards the main pedagogic purpose underpinning the choice of working on English literature, it can be summed up nicely by the motto that is printed on the home page of the wiki itself: *Reading and writing for pleasure!* That implies that through social networking it is possible to recover a more natural and playful approach to literature, which is too often sacrificed on the altar of traditional schooling.

The teachers who joined the project and I agreed on two contemporary short stories to work on: Roald Dahl's *A Parson's Pleasure*[8] and Ron Butlin's *The German Boy*[9].

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[7] http://fanfiction-rome-palermo-messina.wikispaces.com, last accessed January 12, 2014.
[8] Published in *Kiss Kiss*, Michael Joseph, 1960.
[9] Published in E.Jones (ed.), *British Short Stories of Today*, Penguin, London, 1987.

Here are the two cooperative writing and fanfiction tasks assigned to the students.

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1. ROALD DAHL - *Parson's Pleasure: a new ending*
Hello, there! This page contains a file with an extract from Roald Dahl's short story, *Parson's Pleasure*. Read it carefully and carry out the following task with a partner.

Cooperative creative writing
How do you think the story continues? What happens next?
a. Decide what Mr. Rummins (the farmer) and Mr. Boggis do after they have done their deal.
b. Think about an unexpected event that takes place at this point. You can create new characters and a new situation.
c. Think about the consequences of this unexpected situation and what the main problems are.
d. Find a solution for these problems and finish the story.

When you finish, upload your file onto this page. Then, through this wiki you will be able to read the contributions from other members in your group and rearrange them (e.g. add new parts, rewrite a few parts, correct mistakes, etc.). Finally, the group will end up with a number of alternative endings to Dahl's short story.

2. RON BUTLIN - *The German Boy: a letter to Klaus*
Hello, there! This page contains a file with an extract from Ron Butlin's short story, *The German Boy*.
Read it carefully and carry out the following task with a partner.

Cooperative creative writing
Imagine that you are the narrator of the story. Klaus hasn't come back to school after what happened with your Maths teacher, so you decide to write him a letter. Include this information.
a. Tell Klaus how you feel about what happened.
b. Tell him what you think about your schoolmates' reaction the day of the incident.
c. Tell Klaus what you think about his decision to speak only German.
d. What do you suggest he should do now?

When you finish, upload your file onto this page. Then, through this wiki you will be able to read the contributions from other members of your group and rearrange them (e.g. add new parts, rewrite a few parts, correct mistakes, etc.). Finally, the group will end up with a number of alternative letters to Klaus.

In each class the students were divided into two subgroups: one was to work on Dahl's short story and the other on Butlin's. Students could work in pairs and once they had finished writing their texts they would upload them onto the appropriate wiki pages. At this point, each of the students who had worked on Dahl's short story could choose one of the texts produced by his/her companions from a different city and rearrange it as he/she pleased. The same could be done by those who had worked on Butlin's short story. Once this phase of the project was over, the two subgroups swapped roles and worked on each other's texts via the wiki. In this way everyone was able to carry out both assignments and cooperate with the whole group.

Also in this case, the facility called *History* on Wikispaces favoured the creation of a ZPD, whereby learners had the chance to compare and edit the different drafts of their texts and improve them. Interestingly, and quite unexpectedly from the teachers' and from my point of view, the students tended to focus more on content rather than form in reviewing their cooperative work. So, they would normally add new ideas or change parts of their texts to enrich their plots and style rather than correct lexicogrammar deviations from NS norms. This indicates that the use of ELF to carry out web-based assignments in a virtual space that goes beyond the traditional English classroom could well serve the pragmatic needs of the students' CoP. In other words, ELF was used as an appropriate affordance to mediate communication in this particular form of social networking.

Due to space constraints, I will only analyse two examples taken from the texts produced by the students. They should exemplify two interesting processes that are embedded in the use of ELF, namely syntactic calque and unilateral idiomaticity.

1. *"I am agree"* This non-canonical expression is a replica of the Italian lexical phrase: *"sono d'accordo"* that is a routinized formula whose functional use is to express agreement (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992). It corresponds to the English lexical phrase: "I agree". These Italian and English canonical chunks are pragmatically equivalent, whereas their syntactic patterns differ considerably:

Italian syntactic string: (NP) + V + PP
English syntactic string: N + V

In Italian, the copular verb essere 'be' is followed by a stance adverbial locution expressing agreement. In English, instead, we have the use of the performative verb 'agree'. Therefore, the non-canonical

ELF expression *"I am agree"* could be considered a structural calque of the Italian chunk, where a grammatical word class shift has taken place: the English verb 'agree' is treated as an adjective. In this case, therefore, we could say that the phenomenon of language transfer has resulted in a process of syntacticisation (Givón 1979: 208; Tomasello 1999: 42), which is also typical of pidgins and creoles.

2. *"god bless the ignorance"* Because participants shared the same L1, they tended to accept a few expressions which are presumably adaptations of Italian idioms into English. The expression: *"god bless the ignorance"* could be considered a case of unilateral idiomaticity (Seidlhofer 2002) which, if used in a multicultural and multilingual context, would probably affect communication and make its meaning quite ambiguous and opaque.

3. Conclusions

The great potential of computer-mediated communication makes the Internet a valuable resource for English learners. It provides them with a real communicative environment where ELF is used as an affordance that they construct cooperatively to carry out web-mediated communication in a multicultural and multilingual context. However, the incorporation of ELF into ELT is not automatic and cannot be left to an individual's improvisation and spontaneity, as it requires careful planning, identification of objectives, as well as clearly outlined guidelines for both teachers and learners, as this research project aimed to demonstrate.

As for the role of the teacher, fieldwork has shown that he/she should act as a facilitator who: a) filters the students' contributions; b) guides their choices; c) gives advice; d) provides pertinent language input; e) assesses results together with the students.

This study indicates that teachers of English and educators should assume a more open-minded position as regards the use of ELF at school, as it is a sociocultural affordance whereby L2-users share and mediate meanings and contents to achieve their communicative goals. Therefore, classroom activities which require the use of digital facilities (e.g. wikis) should not be overlooked by language teachers, but rather be integrated within the EFL syllabus to enhance learners' competencies and support collaborative relationships.

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