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"There's a Lot of Beauty in Ordinary Things, Isn't That Kind of the Point?": A Study of the Effect of Exposure to American Sitcoms on Natural Speech Acquisition

Relatore
Prof. Erik Castello

Laureanda
Federica Pes
n° matr.2023766 / LMLLA

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Table of Contents

List of Relevant Abbreviations

CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning
CEFR: Common European Framework of Reference
EE: Extramural Exposure
EFL: English as a Foreign Language
ELF: English as Lingua Franca
FLA: Foreign Language Anxiety
L2: Second Language
TOC: The Office Corpus
TVC: Television Corpus

List of Tables and Figures

Tables

Figures

Introduction

In our modern world, not only does technology pervade our daily lives, but it is also highly present in our school and academic life. Language is constantly evolving, which can also imply that terms considered niche one day can become of common use overnight. Yet, texts and audio tracks provided by textbooks are not always up to date with the latest language, as linguistic phenomena quickly develop and become of daily use. Therefore, it is sometimes appropriate to resort to less academic sources available on the internet to provide students with examples of language in use that are not outdated. Engaging with their language can be useful to help learners improve their oral communication skills and sound more appropriate and natural when interacting with native speakers. In this context, more and more English teachers at both secondary and tertiary level decide to integrate their lessons with audio-visual materials available on the internet, as they offer multiple instances of language in all its nuances. In this respect, Grazzi (2012: 176) claims that:

> "The internet should be considered an authentic social environment, inhabited by culturally and ethnically diverse communities who mainly use EFL to interact online. In a globalised world, the heterogeneity of the growing population of net users is perhaps the most tangible manifestation of cross-cultural communication, and the pervasiveness of English as the primary contact language has given strong impulse to the emergence and swift diffusion of non-standard varieties.

As far as language teaching is concerned, it is increasingly common to use authentic sources to offer students authentic examples of language spoken by native speakers. This study aims to show that TV series in English integrated with traditional teaching can be an important tool for learning the language at 360 degrees, both focusing on formal and informal speech. Indeed, if combined with textbook-based teaching, instructors can help students practice their language skills in its most natural and current form to improve their performance at school, to better enjoy their social life and

eventually be more successful in their professional life. In particular, the situation comedy is the genre of TV series that proved to be useful to achieve these goals, due to its humor component that might help students gain more self-confidence and be more motivated when learning the language. Previous studies showed that TV series in the classroom could improve the language acquisition process in numerous aspects, including auditory understanding, vocabulary acquisition and learning pragmatics (Washburn, 2001; Quaglio, 2008; Sezgin & Öztürk, 2020; Muñoz, Pujadas & Pattemore, 2021; Barón & Celaya, 2022). The present research is inspired by this strand of research and explores the benefits that the exposure to the specific genre of sitcoms can bring to EFL learners at a linguistic and attitudinal level. Specifically, through a series of classroom exercises it aims to investigate whether students who regularly watch English-language TV series at home - either subtitled or captioned - can recognize the phraseology of TV language, can memorize new words and new forms of expression faster, and can retain them for longer. The research is based on a group of Italian secondary school EFL learners. Specifically, the respondents were attending a secondary school specializing in modern foreign languages (*liceo linguistico),* and were enrolled from the first to the fifth year of course.

Chapter 1 will present the literature that has been consulted prior to carrying out the research. Studies on extramural exposure to English and their impact on students' academic performance within the European context are reviewed. Then, we investigated why critics consider TV series to be a more authentic material to present as an example of authenticity to students, rather than textbooks. Furthermore, we examined research on the sitcom as a genre, its applicability to language teaching, and its incorporation

into the English lesson. Finally, we inquired about the advantages of including exposure to TV series in the curriculum for secondary students of English.

Chapter 2 will present the methods and materials that were chosen and adapted to perform the present study. We will also mention the features of the quantitative method and the positivist philosophical approach, and explain how the study was structured and divided. We will first introduce the TV show *The Office* (Daniels, Gervais, & Merchant, 2005) and the reasons why it can be suitable for our research purposes. Then, we will present the corpus-based research as a tool to select and rank the phraseology found in *The Office* scripts, considered appropriate to be taught to students during the practical sessions. Secondly, we will explain the two different steps of the research: the survey and the in-class activities. The objectives, the participants, the procedures followed and the limitations of both the questionnaire and the activities will be described in detail.

In Chapter 3, we will report the results obtained from the questionnaire and from the in-class activities with the assistance of tables, pie charts and graphs.

Finally, in Chapter 4 we will compare and contrast the results and discuss them in light of the existing literature and guided by the research hypotheses in Chapter 2. Finally, we will discuss some pedagogical implications of the study. We will try to provide some practical recommendations to language teachers on how to design a learning unit based on the language of sitcoms, along with some suggestions for future studies.

Chapter 1: Review of Related Literature and Research

The development of digital technologies and their use at an ever increasingly younger age has influenced English students' habits in receiving second language (L2) input in their daily lives. The increased use of social media and internet platforms has unlocked a higher accessibility to content in English, which has been explained as extramural English, and includes all the L2 content that students consume out of school, from movies to video-games, from YouTube videos to podcasts. In particular, audio-visual materials have been researched and proved to be a more authentic language input than school text-books, which might often appear boring and detached from reality to learners living in our high-tech world. With the aid of corpus linguistics, scholars conducted analyses of the language of British and American TV series by comparing it to the phraseology appearing in the respective corpora, that are the British National Corpus (BNC)[1] and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)[2], which resulted in the observation that TV series are an authentic reflection of every day, natural and spontaneous English, even if they are scripted, and that they could be beneficial to teaching English as L2 to school students. Among all genres, sitcoms were found to be the most reflective of authentic conversation, and therefore most suitable for English as a Second Language (ESL) learning.

1.1 The General Benefits of Extramural Inputs of English

Research on L2 pedagogy has investigated students' extramural exposure (EE) to English using surveys on their habits with subsequent testing sessions and revealed a

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[1] available at https://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/
[2] available at https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/

general development in vocabulary, listening, and oral skills. The study by Olsson and Sylven's (2015) examined the influence of extramural input on high proficiency students, and set the foundation for further research on external English input on intermediate and primary learners. Their study focused on the analysis of the English proficiency of Swedish students who chose a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) program, compared to non-CLIL students. The study aimed at exploring whether the extramural input both CLIL and non-CLIL students received at home influenced their L2 proficiency and in what matter. In particular, the case-study examined the students' habits of consuming extramural input, followed by a testing session where each student from the two groups had to write an essay, in order to analyze the impact of extramural English on the progress of academic vocabulary. Results showed that CLIL students made use of English more often than non-CLIL students at school and in their spare time. However, for non-CLIL students the acquisition of new vocabulary was more evident, as CLIL students already had the requested proficiency for their academic level, and would rather need higher academic material in order to show an improvement. Indeed, students that lack such stimulus in class should consume more English content at home, as further studies suggest.

As an example, Leona, van Koert, van der Molen, Rispens, Tijms & Snellings (2020) examined out-of-school influences among primary school students in the Netherlands. Participants were asked to answer a questionnaire about their access to extramural input in English at home, and then were tested on vocabulary at various levels. Findings showed that the combination of entertaining media and familial extramural English exposure directly influenced the vocabulary knowledge of the students' learning informally.

Similar results were found by Sundqvist's (2009) through her research. The analysis was conducted on Swedish students, targeting young age groups, and monitoring the effects of the use of extramural English on oral proficiency and vocabulary. Students were asked to fill in a questionnaire about their out-of-school habits that involved English, while the testing phase was carried out over the time of one year, with a collection of speech data based on speaking tests. The English proficiency of students who regularly received extramural input was noticeably higher than that of the ones who did not. Sylven and Sundqvist (2012) gave attention to the type of extramural English input in their study on video-gaming for L2 learning and L2 proficiency among young students. Participants were asked to fill out a diary on a daily basis, registering how many hours they spent making use of English in their free-time activities, whether that was reading books, watching movies or playing video-games. Results showed that more than half of the frequent gamers achieved higher marks in English classes and exhibited a higher L2 proficiency.

The scholars Coşkun and Mutlu (2017) focused on EE among turkish students and developed an "Extramural English Use Scale"[3] to investigate the frequency of high school students' EE in relation to the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), and whether such frequency varies depending on gender and course selection. Findings suggested that participants mostly performed listening activities, while the activities that were the last frequency were related to the writing skill. With regards to gender, the female total EE use frequency is higher than that of boys, yet the average score was almost the same when considering just listening-related EE activities. As far course selection is concerned, the frequency of all EE activities differ based on

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[3] For more information on the designing process and use of the scale see Coşkun and Mutlu's study: Coşkun, Abdullah, and Hakan Tahiri Mutlu. "Investigating High School Students' Use of Extramural English: A Scale Development Study." Online Submission 6.1 (2017): 571-590

the optional courses selected from the 11th grade. Students who selected foreign-language oriented courses are mostly those who participate in EE activities related to speaking and writing. As a whole, it was found that the students' perceived English level increases, and exposure to the foreign language outside school positively influences their foreign language development.

1.2 Realistic Audio-visual Material as a Support to Inauthentic Textbooks

When speaking of presenting content in English during lessons, audio-visual material might be the best alternative to the abstract and unrealistic learning with textbooks. In 1979, Sullivan examined greeting routines used in natural language in Hawaii and how they were presented in textbooks. The scholar found that the most common phrase in textbooks, "How do you do?", occurred only once in 65 instances of everyday natural language. On same note, Scotton and Bernsten (1988) compared directional cues in spontaneous conversation with those in textbook dialogues and found that all of the textbooks lacked speech routines that occurred in natural conversation. Also, King (2002) and Washburn (2011) state that textbooks and classroom materials do not fully reflect spontaneous conversation, as the dialogues are not realistic, and the characters are non-dimensional and stereotyped.

Many studies focused on the truthfulness of the language of film and proved its authenticity despite it being previously scripted, and therefore possibly too artificial to be used to learn English as a L2. Allan (1985), Salzmann (1989), Washburn (2000), suggest that television language mirrors realistic samples of naturally occurring speech because, even though they are scripted, learners are presented with a wide variety of interactions and interlocutors with different combinations of status, gender, age, setting

14

and formality. Even if in some cases such relationships and settings are not realistic, the language is designed to be. TV series provide several examples of informal, authentic language, as they would occur in real-life conversations (Saeedi and Biri, 2016: 31, see also Saricoban and Yuruk, 2016: 116). They are ideal to learn new words and expressions that textbooks would not include. Even though they are scripted, TV dialogues are written to sound natural and believable and mimic face-to-face conversation. Thus, they are characterised by authenticity and spontaneity that is often not depicted in textbooks (Bonsignori 2018: 59). As an example, slang words and phrases, small talk and the most current informal language are some informal linguistic features that are not usually taught through textbook-based English classes. On the same note, Kabooha's (2016: 254) study remarks how TV series and movies demonstrate how native speakers "initiate and sustain a conversational exchange, negotiate meaning and nonverbal communication". Accordingly, Pavesi and Ghia (2020) point out that "the presentation of spontaneous conversation and specialised discourse's rhetorical strategies" (131) are relevant for learning purposes, because they are meant for native speakers and therefore marked by authenticity. Furthermore, such audio-visual input presents different contexts and interactional situations that not only provide learners with a realistic view of the language but also of culture, with insights into the reality of life of native speakers (Kabooha 2016: 248). In other words, because of the spontaneity and variety of dialogues and situational contexts portrayed in American and British movies, students are likely to develop their interactional skills, and learn how to communicate naturally and fluently with native speakers by making use of informal and authentic language.

Other authors made use of Corpus Linguistics[4] in order to run corpus-based analysis on the scripts to probe such a statement. Freddi (2011), for instance, examined film stylistics through a corpus-driven investigation of film phraseology. The author identified recurrent sequences of words in a film corpus and then compared them to general spoken corpora in order to highlight differences between film language and natural conversation. The analysis revealed two kinds of clusters, namely diegetic and conversational. The former reflects the specific register of film dialogue patterns, while the latter represents formulae that mimic natural conversation. The results showed the usefulness of corpus-based research in identifying stylistic patterns suitable for language learning. Segzin & Öztürk (2020) demonstrated said language similarities by comparing the scripts of two British series, *Doctor Who* (Newman, Webber, & Wilson, 2005) and *Sherlock* (Moffat & Gatiss, 2010), named the British TV Series Corpus (BTSC) with the spoken part of the BNC corpus. The authors attempted to answer the question whether the language of TV series corresponds to real spoken language, and how much of it is similar in terms of vocabulary. The study was divided into three steps:

1. comparison in terms of coverage: comparison between the BTSC with the reference corpus to find the percentage of word coverage by the reference text;

2. comparison in terms of frequency: comparison between frequency lists of the BTSC and the BNC in order to find common words;

3. comparison at word level: comparison between lists formed using the most frequent 20 words in the BTSC and in the BNC.

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[4] for definitions and insights on the subject of Corpus Linguistics see Lindquist, H. & Levin M. (2014). *Corpus linguistics and the description of English*. Edinburgh University Press.

The first step revealed that the BTSC covered almost all the most frequent vocabulary of the spoken part of the BNC. The second comparison demonstrated affinity between the BTSC and BNC lists in terms of frequency. The third step revealed that out of the 20 items, 15 were shared by both lists. Overall, the language used in TV series and real-life language are highly similar. The only big difference turned out to be that filler words were more common in the BNC, probably because it is not scripted.

1.3 Sitcom as a Genre

Among all TV genres, critics consider sitcoms the more appropriate model of authentic language. Before presenting the arguments that support such a statement, it is necessary to give a definition of sitcom.

The term "sitcom" was introduced into the American language in the 50s when situation comedies broadcasted on television started to replace radio variety shows, which had been the most popular genre since the turn of the century. Radio had achieved peak popularity in American culture during the Great Depression and the Second World War but went into decline at the end of 1940s, when the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and American Broadcasting Company (ABC), the three major network channels, accelerated their commitment to the development of the new emerging medium of television (Marc 2016: 8). After the traumatic events of WWII the US managed to win without civilian losses and damage to the land, so that investments were made to the manufacture and development of leisure items. As Tueth (2005) states: "television's entrance into American life coincided with the beginning of the era of peace and prosperity" (3). The first sitcoms to be broadcasted were television adaptations of already established radio

variety shows, that aired weekly for half-hour and shared the same primary use of ethnic dialect comedy and laugh tracks (Marc 2016: 3). Butler (2013) remarks that "the sitcom is one of television's founding genres – having existed on radio before making the transition to television." (173). Yet, dialect humor did not perform as well on television as on radio, and needed to change over time in order to appeal to the audience's interests. Marc (2016) points out that in Post-War America "the ethnic sitcoms suffered from the popular promotion of assimilation that accompanied the mass migration of immigrant and second-generation White families from inner-city neighbourhoods to suburban tracts. The exaggerated accents and malapropisms of radio comedy might have become more embarrassing than funny to a significant segment of the early television-viewing audience" (5). Sitcoms were aired on all channels and employed to form a "brand identity" (Sander, 2014: 29), an example to follow for specific target groups of viewers.

To this day, sitcoms are mirrors of society that change their needs and motifs just as a country's political and social situation, so that the audience can see their needs represented and can feel reflected or reassured, and thus stay interested. Sander (2014) traces a timeline of said changes. The first sitcoms of the 50s were filled with marriage or domestic representation, with the focus on normal family life and the normative gender role of wife and husband (e.g. *I love Lucy,* Arnaz, 1951). In the 60s the most popular kind of sitcoms were about escapism (e.g. *Gilligan's Island*, Schwartz, 1964) and nostalgia (e.g. *Bonanza,* Dortort, 1959), "brought on by the need to escape the nightmare of political and social upheaval set off by the Kennedy assassination" (*Ibid.,* 31). Workplace-sitcoms were the audience's favourite in the 70s (e.g. *M*A*S*H,* Gelbart, 1972) and mostly the 80s (e.g. *Cheers*, Charles, Charles, & Burrow, 1981),

which presented more sophisticated and witty dialogues related to the working sphere. Combined with domestic life, they presented a new model of family that marked the long-lasting success of the genre. The 90s brought sitcoms that presented the big city life, with hopeful characters moving to the urban areas in search of a job and a safer life (e.f. *Friends*, Kauffmann & Crane, 1994. Characters and situations depicted in sitcoms over the years offer lifestyle models that indent to appeal to their viewers' issues and needs so that they find themselves identified and decide to keep watching.

One fundamental feature of sitcoms that has survived to the years is comedy and the ability to make the audience laugh. King (2002: 5) attempts at giving a general definition of comedy (5):

> "comedy tends to involve departures of a particular kind – or particular kinds – from what are considered to be the 'normal' routines of life of the social group in question. In order to be marked out as comic, the events represented – or the mode of representation – tend to be different in characteristic ways from what is usually expected in the non-comic world. Comedy often lies in the gap between the two, which can take various forms, including incongruity and exaggeration. [...] Comedy can result from a sense of things being out of place, mixed up or not quite right, in various ways. One set of examples is found in films that derive much of their comedy from temporal, geographical or other forms of displacement".

On the same note Sherman (2003) explains what are the amusing elements that make people laugh and states that (38):

> "it often has to do with 'in-knowledge', with making quick connections and coming close to sensitive issues. We laugh because we are in the know when a brief cultural reference taps a pool of knowledge. We laugh when we suddenly see the hidden implications and can close the gap that the actors have set up for us. We laugh, perhaps, out of a sense of protected shock, when we come dangerously close to taboos, like death and cruelty, or when we see incongruities created by juxtaposition. The important thing in a comedy show is that the audience's perceptions are quick, shared and simultaneous".

Furthermore, comedy shifts depending on the context where the action takes place. Taflinger (1996) distinguished three types of comedy: action comedy, domestic comedy and dramatic comedy. The most popular kind is action comedy, which is based on the topics of family, gimmicks, places, or occupations, and the emphasis is put on

19

verbal and physical action. Domestic comedy is more serious and addresses a wider variety of events and feature more diverse characters, while the less common dramatic comedy covers topics that are not humorous as such, like death, war, crime, aging, unemployment, racism or sexism (Hložková, 2013: 4)

The series that has been chosen for the case-study of the present research, *The Office,* belongs to the early 2000s' "new comedy" (Sander, 2014: 48). This kind of sitcoms use metatextuality as one of their main discursive elements, that acts on three levels:

1. intertextual references such as quotations and citations usually made verbally through the characters;

2. "intertextual quotations that use the characters' thematic construction, referring particularly to the choice of actors who play certain roles, meaning that some actors' professional as well as personal histories, become not only important for indication of genre but also grounds narrative elaboration" (*Ibid.*)

3. the integration of other fictional texts into the primary text, which can be real or only existent within the universe of that text, but they are functional to the existence of the primary text.

Ultimately, it can be difficult to come to a general definition of the sitcom as a genre. Mintz (1985) attempts it by stating that the sitcom is (114):

> "a half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise. That is, each week we encounter the same people in essentially the same setting. The episodes are finite; what happens in a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half hour . . . Sitcoms are generally performed before live audiences, whether broadcast live (in the old days) or filmed or taped, and they usually have an element that might almost be metadrama in the sense that since the laughter is recorded (sometimes even augmented), the audience is aware of watching a play, a performance, a comedy incorporating comic activity. The most important feature of sitcom structure is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premise undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored . . . This faculty for the 'happy ending' is, of course, one of the staples of comedy, according to most comic theory".

Mills (2009) adds that "the sitcom is a genre whose flexibility makes it ideal for programme-makers the world over to draw on, making links between the comic impetus of the genre and the specificities of particular locations, nations, communities and audiences" (145). The genre is therefore not only an appealing humorous lifestyle model, but it is also a genre that is a mirror of society, with its "cultural hybridity" and "cultural mixing" (Flew, 2018).

1.4 The Applicability of Situation Comedies for ESL Teaching

As far as language teaching is concerned, sitcoms seem to be the most ideal audio-visual learning aids, because they present the most authentic and realistic form of speech to their audience. Similarly to Sezgin & Öztürk (2020), who only focused on two fantasy British TV series, Quaglio (2008) examined the language of the sitcom *Friends* (Kauffmann & Crane, 1994) in order to verify its resemblance to natural conversation. The study was conducted by comparing scripts from the sitcom with the Longman Spoken American Corpus[5]. The scripts were divided into excerpts based on type of settings and interactions, and the corpus analysis focused on grammar rather than vocabulary. The study revealed striking similarities between *Friends* and face-to-face conversation. In particular, both in the sitcom and in authentic speech similar discourse functions resulted to be performed by the same linguistic features. The author distinguished between two categories:

1. vagueness: caused by hedges, coordination tags and nouns of vague reference;

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[5] available at http://www.pearsonlongman.com/dictionaries/corpus/spoken-american.html

2. content: caused by adverbial intensifiers, stance markers and expletives/taboo terms.

The author concluded that the vagueness found in *Friends* might not be suitable for learning English as a L2 as it may lead to incomprehensibility. Also, the high number of emotional terms might be the result of an exaggeration of reality. In spite of this, Quaglio considers *Friends* as being a fairly accurate representation of natural language, and suggests the analysis of further American sitcoms.

Moreover, according to Washburn (2001), sitcoms usually feature characters with different social backgrounds, statuses and levels of familiarity that act in different common situations that are reflective of everyday life. The author gives the example of the American sitcom *Frasier* (Angell & Casey, 1993)*,* where characters display strong status, class and cultural differences. These differences translate into a wide range of distinct ways of speaking the language, from vocabulary and pragmatic routines used, to tone, accents and prosodic features. Indeed, Siqueira & Santos Barros (2011) state that TV series reflect our contemporary society, with English as a lingua-franca (ELF) spoken by many non-native speakers as well. This way, students are exposed to a great number of linguistic variations without losing grammatical correctness and effectiveness in communication, due to the dialogues being scripted.

1.5 The Advantages of Incorporating Audio-visual Material into the ESL Class

Research has demonstrated that, because of their likeness to natural speech, audio-visual materials such as movies and TV series can be reliable aids when teaching different aspects of EFL. They could turn the class into a more stimulating learning experience to alternate with students' memorizing of English vocabulary and grammar practice, or to

even replace them with something more true to life that represents a dimension often missing from textbook oriented lessons. Champoux (1999), Sherman (2003), Birch & Gardiner (2005), Sydorenko (2010), Mayer (2014), Sarıçoban & Yürük (2016) and Vijayakumar, Baisel, Subha & Abirami (2020) support the incorporation of film and TV series as part of the students' English learning process. According to the authors, visuality supports the students: it facilitates the understanding of abstract themes and ideas, so when paired to verbal information in audio visual input it may be greatly beneficial for L2 learning, as students could easily make connections between words and pictures.

Moreover, several studies focus on the utility of pairing captions to the audio-visual information. Caimi (2006) states that "the transfer from the spoken text into written form, aims to facilitate the viewer's fruition of the exchanges as they are, thus linking pronunciation to the written form and the mental division of sounds into single words. It is the intentional combination of the phonological expression of the foreign language with its written form that acts as a complementary aid to language comprehension" (2). Accordingly, Saeedi and Biri (2016: 32) point out that students have the possibility to process and comprehend information from two different channels, as "multimedia materials lead to higher cognitive activity and more efficient learning by providing multiple channels of delivery and simultaneous activation of visual as well as cognitive processing". In the same way, Bonsignori (2018: 68) lists many benefits of the exposure to multimodal English in all its varieties by native speakers given by movies and TV series:

1. "learners get to 'see' the language used in specialised contexts and in different genres;

2. being multimodal in nature, clips offer students the chance of being aware of how different modes can actually altogether contribute to the meaning-making process;

3. students could see to what extent non-verbal elements synch as gestures or the use of prosodic stress can be of help in the construction of meaning;

4. clips offer a more hands-on approach to the language, with a wide range of activities targeted to developing different skills".

In 2015, Shabani conducted research aimed at examining the effect of captioned TV series on the vocabulary acquisition of EFL students. Participants included 40 intermediate male students at the Shokouh institute of Nowshahr, Mazandaran, Iran, divided into control and experimental groups. In the pre-testing phase they were asked to complete a matching text including twenty words selected from the TV series *Friends*. Then, one non-captioned episode was shown to the control group, while the captioned one was shown to the experimental group. Later, a post-test was conducted to investigate the development of each group. Findings revealed that the experimental group's performance was significantly higher than the one of the control group in terms of vocabulary development. According to Vanderplank (2016), "the benefits of such multimodal input may be increased by the addition of caption text with which the information is distributed among three channels, easing the load of working memory" (147).

Furthermore, the versatility of TV series allows for its incorporation in different types of learning sessions, offering an extensive variety of materials to satisfy several learning styles and modalities. Altman (1989) and Montero Perez, van den Noortgate & Desmet (2013) suggest that film material can generally contribute to developing

learners' English proficiency. More specifically, said materials can expand the learners knowledge of several language skills components, such as:

- reading comprehension (Sarıçoban & Yürük, 2016);

- pragmatics (Washburn, 2001; Barón & Celaya, 2022);

- grammar (Lee & Revesz, 2018; Muñoz, Pujadas & Pattemore, 2021; Saeedi & Biri, 2016);

- vocabulary (Muñoz, Pujadas & Pattemore, 2021);

- pronunciation (Wiśniewska & Mora, 2020).

Sarıçoban & Yürük (2016) demonstrate how movies can function as a tool for the development of learner reading comprehension. The study was conducted in the context of an EFL classroom on a sample of two groups, an experimental and a control group, whose participants were sophomore students at B1+ level aged 19-21. Both of the groups were asked to read the book *Elizabeth: the Golden Age* (Alexander, 2009) in the period of one month. Subsequently, only the experimental group was exposed to some scenes from the movie based on the book. After reading the book, the control group was asked to answer some comprehension questions on it, while the experimental group received the same questions just after watching the movie scenes. The study concluded that results gathered from the experimental group not only highlighted a better understanding of the book due to better reading comprehension, but also an improvement of their listening skills and knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatic forms. As spin-off results, they found that students who watched the movie clips in class were more motivated and attentive, and appreciated the film as a work of art.

Barón and Celaya (2022) point out that in-class learning with audio-visual material could represent effortless and "incidental" learning for students. In their study, the authors focused on socio-pragmatics and pragma-linguistic competence, and investigated two main topics. First, whether audio-visual material had an actual effect on L2 incidental pragmatic learning. Second, whether there was a difference between the effect of captioned and non-captioned input. The study considered 31 Catalan/Spanish B1 proficiency learners signed up for the Cambridge English First Certificate (FCE), willing to achieve B2 level. The participants were divided into two groups, one exposed to captioned and the other exposed to non-captioned material. They were shown seven video excerpts from various American TV series and were asked to perform some role-play activities before and after watching the videos. The pragmatic sequences included:

- asking for information and responding to it;

- asking and offering help, and responding to it;

- apologizing and responding to it;

- promising and responding to it.

The authors analysed the frequency of the pragmatic expressions used before and after watching the excerpts, that were subsequently assessed by native speakers (the professors) based on their pragmatic appropriateness.

On the one hand, results showed that the use of audio-visual material in class may be beneficial for pragmatic acquisition of the L2. The pairing of context, situation, prosody, gestures and gaze with pragmatic exchange is an effective combination for socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic learning. On the other hand, the use of captions

resulted to be significantly helpful because it served as a further visual aid. In the same way, the studies by Muñoz, Pujadas & Pattemore (2021) proved that students can improve their vocabulary and grammar knowledge thanks to the in-class viewing of American series. The first study examined the acquisition of vocabulary of a group of adolescent participants at an elementary English level, who viewed 24 episodes of the series *Fresh Off the Boat* (Khan, 2015) over the course of the academic year. The second study focused on grammar acquisition in two groups of university students at intermediate level who viewed 10 episodes of *The Good Place* (Schur, 2016) over the course of five weeks, one group with captions and the other without them. Both cases highlighted the correlation between words used by the learners in the exercises and their frequency in the episodes shown in class. Also, a significant advantage of captions over no-captions was registered for grammar learning. Overall, viewing TV series in class can effectively support students during L2 acquisition.

Another important learning factor mentioned by critics is the role of student motivation. In this respect, Kabooha (2016) explains how the use of films in the English class is likely to develop student language proficiency. The research was conducted on a sample of 50 female intermediate level students studying at the English Language Institute at King Abdul-Aziz University in Saudi Arabia, where both students and teachers were interviewed and asked for their opinion on including movies as part of English classes. Then, teachers were required to write a reflective journal and think critically about their classes when they used movies as a tool for teaching. Results revealed that most of the participants responded positively to the use of movies in class and perceived a rise in both motivation and performance, because their anxiety level

lowered during the class discussions after collective viewing, and therefore should be included more often in the English class.

All these experiences suggest that, among all genres, situation comedies present many benefits for effective English learning: they represent authentic language, offer realistic characters and situations, and because of the humour in some scenes they can bring about a relaxed class environment that might put students at ease when speaking.

Sitcoms seem to foster confidence due to their amusing component, that can make students more at ease in the learning context. In the language classroom, humour tends to be expressed via jokes, tough sitcoms express it in a different way. Corke (2013) argues that scenes are orchestrated in a specific way so the audience do not laugh at actual jokes, but at comic behavior or situations. The first relates to characterization, that is the way a character behaves and interacts with their surroundings . The second deals with the situations created when such a character comes into contact with others. Hložková (2013) remarks that "people usually enjoy characters' temperament, speech styles and mannerisms, their interactions, the fact that these characters are trapped in relationships, insults and responses to these insults such as misunderstanding, insult taken as compliment, insult understood but ignored or witty answer" (17). In particular, we as viewers find it amusing when the characters of the sitcom do not find any of these situations enjoyable. Hlozkova points out the importance of humor, as they state that it "not only brings the people together but it may serve as a valuable educational tool, which can be included in every stage of the learning process. English learning and teaching via authentic humour in sitcoms is like an inseparable infinite circle, when the language and culture are taught through humour, and vice versa" (*ibid.*).

The lesson plan proposed by Washburn (2001) is interesting in the context of using sitcoms as a tool to learn pragmatics with amusing videos. Alongside being against the sole use of textbooks, the author reinforces the idea that it is necessary to create a more informal learning context, as students who learn common speech routines might suffer anxiety due to the pressure to communicate in class, which may result in inappropriate uses of language. According to Washburn, teachers have the tendency to ignore linguistic inaccuracies with a view to avoiding uncomfortable situations. Some inaccuracies might indeed be attributed to the students' culture or personality. However, language learners who violate pragmatic norms may not be aware of doing so. Therefore, the author presents a teaching unit that incorporates situation comedies as an instrument to learning pragmatics. This is designed for intermediate to advanced students and includes viewing clips from the TV show *Seinfeld* (David & Seinfeld, 1989). The students are asked to first watch the scenes without audio and speculate about the context. Then, they are shown the same scenes with audio and are asked to identify the speech routines. Finally, they are asked to watch some funny clips where pragmatic norms are violated and thus generate humour, and are asked to discuss why the errors create amusing situations. The advantages of using sitcoms among all genres are several. Not only do they offer models that reflect everyday rich, varied and contextualized life situations, but also make the pragmatic violations easy to identify, thanks to their comedic purpose. Finally, sitcoms offer non-verbal commentary on pragmatic speech, such as expressions of surprise, dismay or delight.

Valizadeh (2022) study is relevant in this context, as it examines the effects of sitcoms on EFL learners' foreign language anxiety (FLA) and motivation for learning. Results obtained suggested that watching sitcoms had the largest positive effect size on

the variable of test anxiety, followed by variables "anxiety of English classes", "fear of negative evaluation" and "communication anxiety" (38).

Such findings can be explained by addressing Krashen's theory of the 'socio-affective filter' (1981: 21). The complete acquisition of a language happens when the learner not only understands the input, but he is also 'open' to it. The scholar states (22):

> "Performers with high or strong filters will acquire less of the language directed at them, as less input is "allowed in" to the language-acquisition device. The presence of such a filter, [...] may explain which of alternative models the acquirer will internalize (e.g. why children acquire the dialect of their peers rather than that of their elders), why acquisition prematurely ceases in some cases, and often what parts of language are acquired first. Thus, attitudinal factors relating to language acquisition will be those that contribute to a low affective filter".

Among the attitudinal factors mentioned by Krashen there are "instrumental motivation" (*Ibid.*) and "empathy" (23), which can be linked to students' increase in motivation and confidence when using sitcoms to learn English, as they use them as learning tools while enjoying them because of characters' relatability.

So, as Lima and Senefonte (2020) remark, there seems to be a consensus between the popularity of the genre of sitcoms among teenagers and young adults, and its educational features, such as authenticity and depiction of various characters in different amusing situations. This research develops on the fact that students learn better when presented with content they enjoy and are familiarized with.

In this context, the present dissertation aims at monitoring students' development of conversational English following the integration of sitcoms in the language class. Choices regarding the most appropriate audio-visual material to show in the classroom should follow some general criteria about content and target group of learners.

1.6 Building a Lesson around a Sitcom

The teacher's task is to choose the way in which they want to exploit the sitcom during the lesson, select the appropriate episode or scene, and plan the activities that students have to complete before, during and after the viewing. The selection of the audio-visual material does not have to be casual, yet it must be appropriate for the school context, and the age and language proficiency of students.

Hložková (2014: 28) lists the criteria for video selection:

- teachers should be already familiar with the material, which needs to be current, relevant to the topic, and appealing to the students' interests;
- high audio-visual correlation, that is "picture and sound match together to enhance meaning". It is best to use a sitcom with numerous layers, as repeated viewing may reveal additional components such as paralinguistic traits, jokes, or cultural references;
- teachers should not avoid videos that display difficult language, yet should only adapt the activities to the students' level. The elements to strictly avoid are taboo language and issues.

Adding to the list, Allan (2018) makes clear that the duration of the video is determined by how teachers intend to use it, the individual learners and the amount of class time. For example, less advanced students would benefit from seeing shorter sequences because their attention span is limited due to poor knowledge of English. Hence, when integrating classes with realistic audio visual material, teachers should begin with shorter video extracts, and then progressively show longer sequences when dealing with more advanced students, used to exposure to natural English.

Regarding activities based on authentic videos, Sherman (2003) encourages teachers to avoid two extremes while employing sitcoms in their classrooms. On the one hand, it is not ideal to employ such content without educational value. On the other hand, it is recommended to avoid content-dense activities that could be too complicated and tiring. Indeed, Sherman suggests a "gentle and generic" (Sherman, 2003: 7) strategy, in which activities based on audio-visual material arise naturally from the sitcom and exploit its particular qualities. The activities should be carried out before viewing the material in order to prepare the learner to comprehend it (e.g. asking warm-up questions, introducing new vocabulary, explaining cultural references or language functions, giving background information). Then, students should complete tasks during the viewing, paying attention to the meaningful elements introduced by the teacher. Last, to end the viewing process teachers should present the students with follow-up activities that demonstrate the broader application of the elements seen; this can be done by providing supplementary material, having a class discussion, reading the news on the topic, etc.

It is evident that the aforementioned approach has been employed in the present study. The lesson plan for the second step of the study has been designed for lower-intermediate to intermediate students according to the following Global Scale[6] based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, Table 3), which indicates the students' abilities taken into consideration.

B1 - lower intermediate	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters

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[6] available at the official website of the Council of Europe:
https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-1-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-global-scale.

	regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
B2 - intermediate	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

Table 3 – Global Scale: Common Reference Levels

What is more, we made use of the sitcom *The Office* for its authenticity of language, relatability of characters, amusing content, and increasing popularity among teenagers. Chapter 2 will provide in-depth information about the structure and objectives of the research, as well as materials and softwares used.

Chapter 2. Materials and Methods

The aim of this chapter is to describe the methods followed in the study on the effectiveness of situation comedies as part of the English lesson to develop natural conversation.

During the research phase, the adoption of quantitative methods based on the positivist philosophical approach allowed the collection and comparison of objective data through two testing phases conducted in the educational context. According to Mukherji and Albon (2018: 11):

> "The positivist paradigm sees the world as being based on unchanging, universal laws and the view that everything that occurs around us can be explained by a knowledge of these universal laws. To understand these universal laws, we need to observe and record events and phenomena around us systematically and then work out the underlying principle that has 'caused' the event to occur".

Following this philosophy, the method adopted is therefore quantitative with a confirmatory approach. Research starts with a theory, develops a hypothesis based on the theory, and tests such a hypothesis with an empirical investigation.

Based on the existing literature, the general hypothesis that has been formulated states that students who regularly make use of extramural input, that is watch movies and TV series in English outside of school are expected to perform better when asked to learn and use new grammar or vocabulary, and indicate less frustration in completing in-class activities. In particular, situation comedies have been found to be the most authentic evidence of conversational English, and the most suitable for creating a stress-free learning environment. Therefore, the current study moves from the hypothesis that watching movies and TV series in English as part of the language lesson might help students improve their informal English proficiency, spacing from grammar, vocabulary and pragmatic routines, to listening and speaking skills.

Similar research has been conducted at university level with the use of British and drama TV series, but has not yet investigated the integration of sitcoms into secondary school English classes. To address the gap, the present study focuses on the contribution of the 2000s TV show *The Office* in secondary school students' development of natural conversation. Hence, the case-study approach has been adopted, as it allows for an in-depth analysis of the modalities of language acquisition in its natural context, addressing the participants directly.

In what follows, we will explain the preparation process for the case-study, which has been divided into two stages: an online survey and a school session dedicated to in-class activities. For each stage, we will present the research questions, the structure and the design process of the content, as well as the participants, the procedure followed, and the limitations encountered.

2.1 The Survey

With regards to the first stage of the study, we designed a survey which aimed at collecting data on school students' ways of accessing the English language at home, to analyze their preferences concerning movies or TV series, viewing frequency, and viewing modes.

The survey attempted to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: What is the extent of extramural exposure to English among Italian secondary school students?
  - RQ1.1: What kinds of informal input in English do they prefer and what is their viewing frequency?

- RQ2: What are the reasons for consuming such content and which are the viewing preferences regarding genre, subtitles, and dubbing?

- RQ3: Which are the benefits of watching such content according to the students?

To collect the data required to answer the research questions, the author has created the survey on Google Forms based on the questionnaire "Informal Contact with English" designed by Pavesi and Ghia (2020). Such a source has been translated to English, edited to best fit the purpose of this research, and it has similarly been divided into different sections (Appendix 1).

Firstly, students are asked to provide information about themselves and their language background, whether referred to the acquisition of English or of other languages. Questions about their age, gender, native language, and knowledge of other languages are followed by questions that focus more on the student experience with English language learning. The second section refers to the participants' habits of accessing movies and TV series in English outside of school. It includes questions about whether the subjects watch American or British movies and TV series at home, the viewing frequency of each input and how much time they spend watching them on average. Thirdly, the survey requires students to think about their viewing habits of movies and TV series separately, as it presents questions about reasons for choosing one kind of audio-visual input on top of the other, and its related viewing preferences. Students are asked about their preferences regarding watching content in the original language, with subtitles in Italian, with subtitles in English, or dubbed in Italian, and are asked to justify their choices. Also, the survey presents the students with several questions about the platforms where they prefer to consume content in English and their favorite genres. The survey's final section focuses on language competence. Students

are asked to reflect on their English proficiency and answer whether they feel they made progress by watching movies or TV series, and which competence has improved the most.

The questionnaire aims to collect quantitative data on how many students are exposed to extramural English at home, and allows for the creation of a clear profile of the participants in this case-study. The sample group comprises 47 Italian adolescents studying a foreign language-oriented course at the Lyceum Michelangelo Grigoletti in Pordenone, and counts 27 females, 18 males and two non-binary participants, aged from 14 to 19 years old. At the time of filling the questionnaire, most of the students were coursing the last two years of high school, with 12 participants in the fourth year and 19 participants in the fifth year. No students with learning disabilities participated in the study.

As the author could not be physically present to administer the questionnaire, an introductory video explaining the purpose of the research was recorded and shown to the participants. The sample group was asked to fill in the questionnaire online under the supervision of the English teacher, either in class with their cell phone, or at home, since it was also uploaded on the class's online Moodle. To proceed with the analysis, the collected data were summarized through graphs and pie charts, and subsequently exported into an Excel file.

Limitations encountered include issues regarding the truthfulness of the students' answers. According to previous studies, in many cases, students might give false answers when exposed to such questionnaires (Pavesi & Ghia, 2020: 66). They may respond influenced by teacher pressure or time, or they may provide the information the researcher expects to receive, even unconsciously. In addition, they may

overestimate their language skills, because they would not be subjected to tests or activities that require them to show their competence.

2.2 In-Class Activities

The second phase of the experiment includes practical activities that aim to demonstrate that combining the viewing of sitcoms with textbook-based teaching can lead to advantageous results with regard to improving listening skills, learning vocabulary and pragmatic routines. The in-class activities were meant to confirm that students who are already familiar with TV series phraseology can easily identify informal language features, typical of day-to-day conversations, and easily complete the exercises. This would support the fact that including sitcoms as part of the English lesson might be beneficial for every student, especially for those who do not watch them in their free time outside of school, because it would present them with the opportunity of creating a useful habit. The second stage of the case study aims to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: How much TV language are students already familiar with, and how much of it is related to their English proficiency level?
- RQ2: Is it really useful to show TV series to students during their English class? In a much broader sense, is it effective to have exposure to informal language inside the school context in order to provide students with an all-round knowledge of English?

To answer these questions, it has been necessary to find a sitcom that pairs authenticity with humour, and that might appeal to the students' interests.

2.2.1 The Office: Finding Beauty in Ordinary Things

The show *The Office* was chosen due to its increasing popularity among teenagers, resemblance to real life, and tendency to draw the audience to watch it multiple times. *The Office* is an American sitcom directed and produced by Greg Daniels, based on the homonymous British TV series written by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant. It aired on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) from 2005 to 2013, and comprised 201 episodes divided into nine seasons. The show won several awards, such as a Golden Globe for Steve Carrell's performance and five Primetime Emmy Awards, including one for best comedy show[7]. It was shot in the form of "mockumentary"[8] and narrates the lives of the employers of Dunder Mifflin, a small paper company located in the city of Scranton, Pennsylvania.

In 2020, the COVID pandemic marked a transitional time for television and streaming services all over the world. If we look at the statistics, this particular moment in history had dramatic impacts on sports and news broadcasting, as people started to gravitate towards shows where they could escape the problems of reality. According to data collected by Nielsen Media Research (NMR)[9], the most-viewed pieces of content on streaming platforms overall were not original and new, but rather older shows, where the audience could find comfort. It was found that *The Office* was the most streamed show as of December of 2020, with over 57 billion minutes (table 1), even more than

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[7] Source: https://m.imdb.com/title/tt0386676/awards/?ref_=tt_awd (last visited on 26/10/2022)

[8] For more information on the genre of "mockumentary" see Campbell, Miranda, (2007). "The mocking mockumentary and the ethics of irony." *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* 11.1 (last visited on DATE??)

[9] Nielsen Media Research (NMR) is an American corporation founded in 1996 and based in New York, which measures and collects data on media audiences of television, radio, teather, films and newspapers. Nielsen ratings are a widely known measurement system of television viewership that function as a deciding factor in cancelling or renewing television shows. Website available at: https://www.nielsen.com/ (last visited on 26/10/2022)

the most streamed original show *Ozark* (Dubuque & Williams, 2017, 30.5 billion minutes, table 2).

Rank	Program Name	SVOD Provider(s)	# of Episodes	Minutes Streamed (Nearest Million)
1	THE OFFICE	Netflix	192	57,127
2	GREY'S ANATOMY	Netflix	366	39,405
3	CRIMINAL MINDS	Netflix	277	35,414
4	NCIS	Netflix	353	28,134
5	SCHITT'S CREEK	Netflix	70	23,785
6	SUPERNATURAL	Netflix	318	20,336
7	SHAMELESS	Netflix	122	18,218
8	NEW GIRL	Netflix	146	14,545
9	THE BLACKLIST	Netflix	152	14,480
10	VAMPIRE DIARIES	Netflix	171	14,091

Table 1 – top streaming content of 2020: acquired series[10]

Rank	Program Name	SVOD Provider(s)	# of Episodes	Minutes Streamed (Nearest Million)
1	OZARK	Netflix	30	30,462
2	LUCIFER	Netflix	75	18,975
3	THE CROWN	Netflix	40	16,275
4	TIGER KING	Netflix	8	15,611
5	THE MANDALORIAN	Disney+	16	14,519
6	THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY	Netflix	20	13,470
7	GREAT BRITISH BAKING SHOW	Netflix	65	13,279
8	BOSS BABY: BACK IN BUSINESS	Netflix	49	12,625
9	LONGMIRE	Netflix	63	11,382
10	YOU	Netflix	20	10,965

Table 2 – top streaming content of 2020: original series

The secret to *The Office*'s popularity is that it does not feel like a show that belongs to a certain era, but rather can appeal to many generations, both young and old. Thorp's (2021) article for the BBC remarks the increasing popularity of the show among teenagers and young adults, still relevant 20 years after the release of the first British

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[10] Source for Table 1 and Table 2 is Nielsen SVOD Content Ratings, available at https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2021/tops-of-2020-nielsen-streaming-unwrapped/ (last visited on 26/10/2022)

version.   It is defined as "the most extraordinary comedy success story of the 21st Century" and such success is in part attributed to it being added to Netflix in 2018, five years after the ending of the show. In their book *Welcome to Dunder Mifflin. The Ultimate Oral History of The Office* Baumgartner and Silverman (2021), investigated why younger generations are attracted to a TV show about working adults who lived in a world without smartphones and social-media. Interviews with screenwriters, directors and executive producers shed light on the relatability of the characters and the comedy genre.

The characters are meant to look and behave like real people, with all their flaws and imperfections that make the audience identify with them in multiple different ways. Baumgartner reports the opinion of Veda Semarne, script supervisor, that characters "are all dealing with pretty difficult issues and identity issues and things that kids have to deal with, finding the right friends and being part of things or being left out of things. All those issues are important to kids" (2021: 417). Indeed, the show is considered to be a source of comfort for all those people who feel marginalized, because it appreciates people of all sizes, denominations and creeds. In a society driven by success, both academic and career wise, "to have this slice of ordinariness" matters. The approach taken with the writing of the characters is key to the rewatchable feature of the show. Character comedy and behavior was valued over single jokes, so that the audience could grow attachment to characters. Actors' opinions on the matter remark that "you turn it on and you know where everyone's going to be. [...] Those people become like your extended family. And you are just sort of checking in with them. [...] Dunder Mifflin is kind of aggressively mundane, but when you look closely and you get in the hearts of

these people, it is enormously complex and beautiful and familiar all at once" (Baumgartner & Silverman, 2021: 426).

Another factor that might appeal to younger viewers is the kind of comedy presented in the show. It is the comedy of failure, awkwardness and poor communication, referred to as "cringe comedy" by TV producers and directors. The show plays on the idea that the most embarrassing moments in life are not so negative when someone else is going through them, instead it can be quite liberating to watch them from a distant perspective (Baumgartner & Silverman, 2021: 210). The dynamic between boss and workers is what defines the "cringe" aspect. Employees must work for him, and we observe how that relationship moves and changes, how they manage the space in-between, and how the social contract is violated at various degrees.

All the characteristics mentioned above define *The Office* as the ideal audio-visual material to present to secondary school students, because they could identify themselves with the diverse relatable characters and it could provide them with a glimpse into an American ordinary environment, which expands to the informal and colloquial language used.

2.2.2 The Corpus Analysis

To select relevant elements of everyday and informal English to teach to the students, scripts from all the nine seasons of the TV show *The Office* were taken into consideration for a corpus-based analysis. *The Office* fan community has created an Excel file with all the lines from the show[11], which we converted into a raw file. With the use of Microsoft Word, the file underwent a cleaning procedure to make it more

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[11] Available at http//:www.officequotes.net (last visited on 13/09/2022)

suitable for corpus analysis. The names of the characters associated with each line were taken away and the deleted scenes filtered out, as well as improvisations, and descriptions of actions that do not represent utterances. Then, the resulting corpus, The Office Corpus (TOC), was uploaded onto the software *AntConc* to perform the analysis (Figure 1).
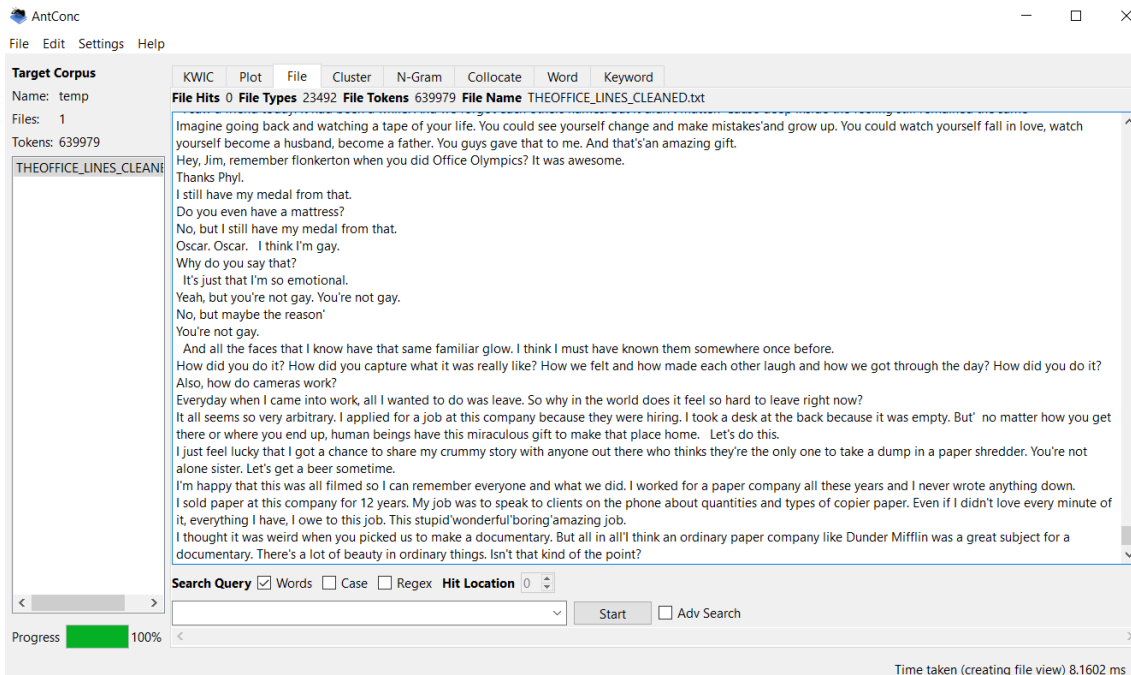
Figure 1 – example of visualization of the TOC in Antconc

Table 3 describes the number of tokens, types and type/token ratio of the TOC:

The Office Lines Corpus (scripts of all episodes from S1 to S9, deleted scenes and improvisations excluded).	AntConc derived quantitative data
No. of Tokens	639,979
No. of Types	23,492
Type/Token ratio	3.6

Table 3 – Quantitative data concerning the TOC corpus

The first step of the corpus analysis involved the creation of word lists based on the frequency of the most recurrent phraseology in the show, compared them to the ones that occur in the "TV Corpus" (TVC)[12], and investigated the frequency of the most significant group of words. The TVC was used as a source of comparison, since it is a highly helpful resource to look at informal language, as it contains 325 million words of data from 75,000 TV episodes that aired from the 1950s to the present. Thus, it serves as a great resource to look at very informal language, and as it states on the official page "is much larger than any other corpus of informal English", as it contains data from the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Ireland.

As can be seen from Table 4, the first 10 most frequent words of TOC are not content words, but rather articles, pronouns, prepositions and conjunctions of basic English. Thus, the investigation has been extended to the first 100 words and selected:

Type	Rank	Frequency
yeah	39	3094
okay	42	2816
right	45	2570
well	49	2414

Table 4 – frequency of selected words in the TOC

As a way to evaluate the most occurring words of the TOC, we investigated the frequency of the same words in TVC. TVC does not allow for the creation of word lists based on frequency, but retrieves frequency information by searching single words or n-grams.

Table 5 shows the most occurring words in TOC. By comparing Table 4 and Table 5 we can see that the most frequent words in TOC are also highly frequent in the TVC,

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[12] available at http//:www.english-corpora.org (last visited on 30/10/2022)

as both numbers referring to all the corpus and to the US and Canada corpus indicate. Also, the number of types per million words shows high frequency. Thus, such words can be considered typical of TV series phraseology, and therefore suitable for in-class activities aimed at teaching natural language.

Type	Section	All (325 million words)	US/CA (265.8 million words)
yeah	Frequency	1166388	1003969
	types/million words	3,588.89	3,777.16
okay	Frequency	777029	758560
	types/ million words	2,390	2,853.87
right	Frequency	1256203	1076498
	types/million words	3,865.24	4,050.03
well	Frequency	1155438	936360
	types/million words	3,555.19	3,522.80

Table 5 – Frequency and types/million words of selected phraseology in the TVC

The first 100 2-grams, 3-grams and 4-grams were investigated in the TOC, and the most relevant for this study are reported in Table 6:

N-gram	Type	Rank	Frequency
2-gram	all right	43	716
	I mean	61	573
3-gram	you know what	3	747
	oh my god	12	381
	here we go	47	176
4-gram	what are you doing	8	173
	what s going on	18	95
	I need you to	48	55

Table 6 – N-gram frequency in the TOC

The n-grams in Table 6 were selected because of their high frequency in the TOC as part of spontaneous conversations.

As Table 7 shows, their frequency was also examined in the TVC:

N-gram	Type	Frequency
2-gram	all right	409790
	I mean	249279
3-gram	you know what	118305
	oh my god	9265
	here we go	20667
4-gram	what are you doing	78811
	what s going on	50571
	I need you to	21696

Table 7 – N-gram frequency in the TVC

With regard to n-grams, TVC does not provide information about internal variation. That is, it has not been possible to distinguish frequency in the corpus as a whole, from the frequency in the US and Canada sub-corpora. However, the figures demonstrate the high relevance of the groups of words, proving them eligible for their inclusion in the exercises.

Table 8 summarizes the words and n-grams examined and consequently chosen for the in-class activities, as they seem to be meaningful instances of TV series phraseology and natural language. We also decided to include other recurring instances that regularly occur in TV series that are suitable for the study:

Vocative familiarizers	Everyone
Interjections that express emotions	Yeah, wow, oh my God
Discourse markers	Okay, right, well, look, I mean
Recurring conversational expressions	I have no idea, keep track, come across, cut off, turn

	out, do you need me to, pick me up, you know what, hold on, go out, make up, all right, here we go, are you okay, what are you doing, what s going on
Vocabulary	Trick, tune, organ donor, harvest, pretty, enjoy, smell, clamped, rescue, burned, bother, basically, pace

Table 8 – selected TV phraseology for the study

The selected words were taken into consideration to design the activities proposed during the in-class stage of the case-study.

2.2.3 The Designing Process of the Activities

We created a lesson plan made up of three activities aimed at testing the students' knowledge of TV series phraseology and, by extension, natural English conversation. Each of the exercises involves asking close-ended questions about a short video clip (two to three minutes), with a view to collecting quantitative data on the students' performance.

Prior to such exercises, the students are asked to answer three warm-up questions after watching the "Parkour"[13] clip. These are meant to gather some information on the students' experiences and opinions about learning with TV series as an integrating part of the English lesson. As it is a brainstorming activity, they are not required to write their answers, but their response is relevant for our purposes, as it presents the point of view of the interested party.

The three activities based on the selected phraseology are objective, close-ended exercises. Firstly, students are asked to watch the clip "First Aid Fail"[14] and complete a gap-fill activity. They are provided with three excerpts from the script of the scene and

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[13] Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Kvw2BPKjz0&t=1s (last visited on 18/06/2022).
[14] Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vmb1tqYqyII&t=1s (last visited on 18/06/2022).

are required to fill in the gaps with the words while watching it. Then, if necessary, they can listen to it a second time to check their answers. The words that students are asked to insert are interjections and meaningful vocabulary. The second exercise is a multiple-choice activity, whereby students are required to choose the best words to complete the excerpts from the dialogue "Michael's Injury"[15] without watching the scene. Then, they watch the clip to check their answers. Words include interjections seen in the previous exercise, vocabulary, and recurring natural expressions. The third and final exercise is a matching activity. It invites the students to watch the scene "Dwight owns a Bed and Breakfast"[16] and then to match the sentences in order to complete the dialogue about booking a stay in a Bed and Breakfast. Students get to listen to only one end of the conversation in the scene, and so they need to imagine what would fit best as answers.

We developed the aforementioned activities after discussing them with the school teacher. The classroom study was carried out during an hour-long English lesson under the supervision of the teacher in a fourth-grade class at the Liceo Michelangelo Grigoletti in Pordenone. The activities were proposed to the students in the form of online exercises on Google Forms, so that the author could record and save the results directly for further comparison and discussion. The videos were shown to the participants using the interactive whiteboard (LIM) and monitored by the teacher. Captions were turned off in order to prevent copying the words on the screen to complete the exercises. The structure of the lesson was previously planned and discussed in collaboration with the teacher, to correctly match the level of difficulty required by the study and by their school curriculum. The participants in this second

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[15] available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_HR_o0jDqw (last visited on 18/06/2022).
[16] available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ugh6ctH2SE&t=10s (last visited on 18/06/2022).

step of the research were a group of 17 fourth-year students, who had also formed part of the first group that had completed the questionnaire. Therefore, all students were generally at the same level of English. They defined their knowledge as either intermediate or between intermediate and advanced.

Limitations regarding this part of the study included the excessive enthusiasm and hyperactivity on the participants' part, which at times led the teacher to intervene and thus alter the course of the lesson. This type of activity is likely to be misinterpreted by the students as a kind of break from study, and therefore not taken seriously enough. However, it was precisely this more relaxed atmosphere during the research that yielded positive results and shed light on some interesting insights that will be discussed in the following chapter.

This section has aimed at explaining the methodological choices made to conduct the study of the extent to which the integration of extramural material, such as American TV series, might ease the language acquisition process of secondary school Italian students. We presented the two stages, the survey and the in-class activities, describing for each of them the aims, structures, participants, procedures and limitations. The first step involved collecting data on the participants' habits regarding viewing audio-visual materials in English, and therefore checked the extent of their familiarity with TV language. The second step examined whether such contents might be helpful in the school context, by assisting students with learning conversational phraseology.

As the following chapter explains, interesting results were obtained from the study, thanks to the adoption of a positivist philosophy, which led to quantitative

research with a confirmatory approach, visible in making use of an objective survey and close-ended tests that answered the previously formulated research questions.

Chapter 3. Findings

In this section, we will address the research questions presented in the previous chapter by illustrating the findings of the case-study.

The questionnaire made it possible to investigate the students' habits with regard to their ways of accessing English outside of school, and the frequency with which they watch TV series and movies in the original language. Furthermore, we examined the reasons why Italian students watch such contents in a non-scholastic environment and the benefits they think that they might take from it. The survey returned 47 responses.

3.1 The Survey

To begin with, participants were asked about their personal experience with English as a second language. More than half of them (51.1%) stated that they speak two more languages besides their native one, while 38.3% speak just one more language (Figure 2). Overall, all the participants speak English as a second language and almost all of them started learning it when they were six years old. As a result, over half of the surveyed (55.3%) consider their own English proficiency at an intermediate level (Figure 2.1). From the charts in Figure 2.2 and Figure 2.3 it can be seen that 38.3% of the students also spent a period of time in an English-speaking country; almost all of them (88.9%) from one to three weeks.
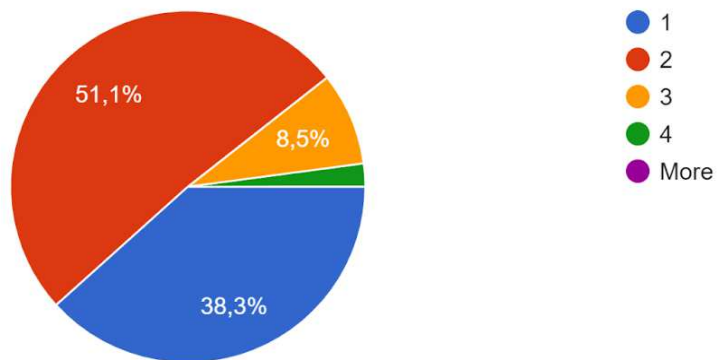
Figure 2 – 'How many other languages do you know apart from your native language (at least on a basic level?)'
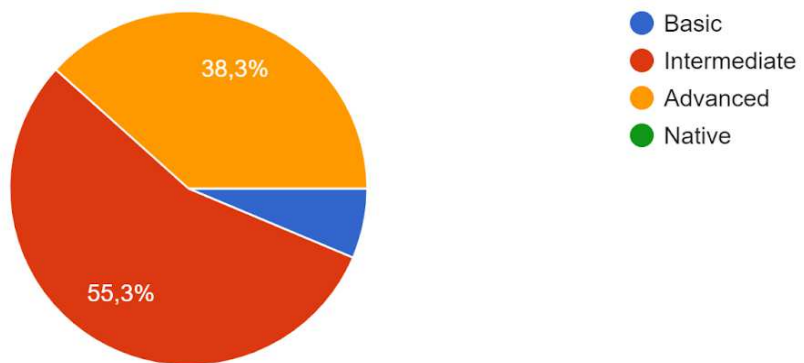

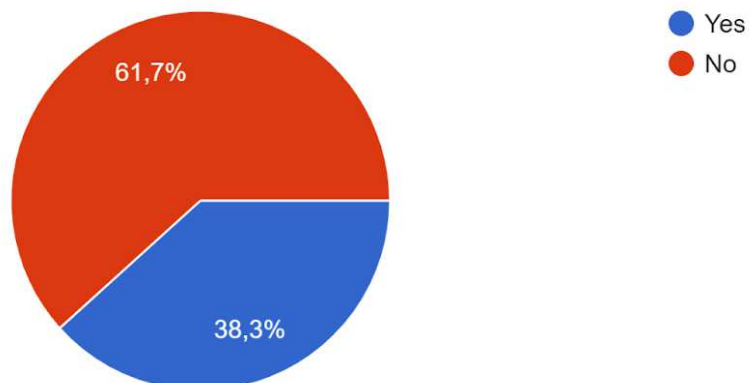*Figure 2.1 – 'Do you think that your English level is:'*

Figure 2.2 - 'Have you ever spent a period of time in an English-speaking country?'
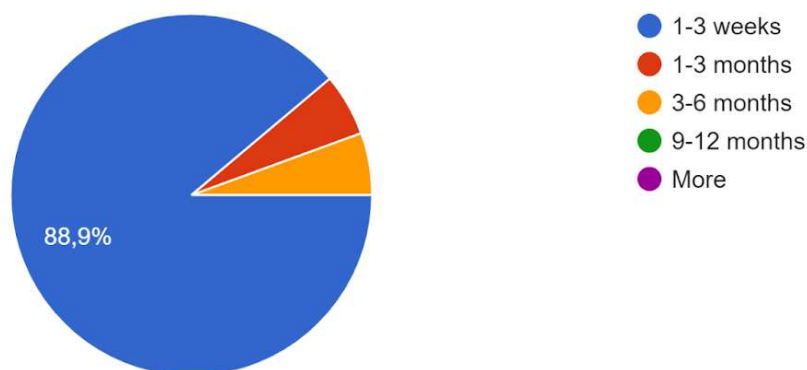
Figure 2.3 - If you answered "yes" to the previous question, how much time did you spend living in an English-speaking country?

The next set of questions explores how frequently they watch movies and TV series in English. The minority (19.1%) of participants indicated that they prefer to watch movies, while the majority of those who responded to this item felt that they prefer watching only TV series (40.4%), or both TV series and movies (40.4%). If we now turn to frequency, slightly more than half of those surveyed (51.1%) reported that they rarely watch movies in English, and 27.7% of them often watch them (Figure 3).
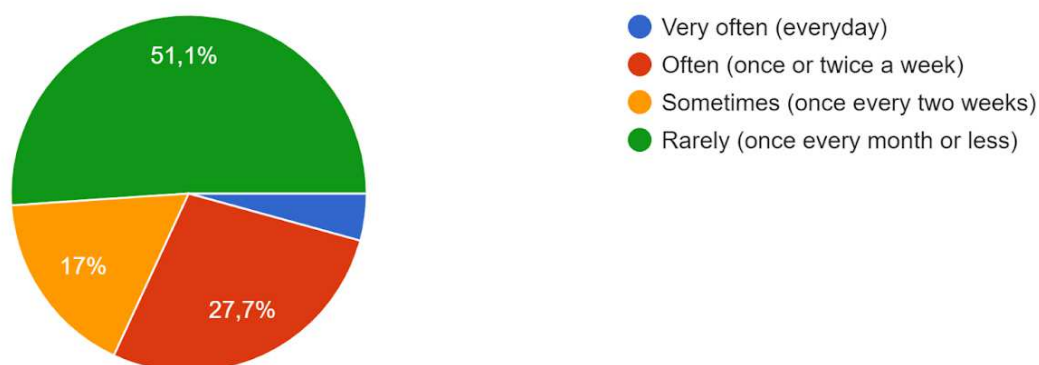

Figure 3 - 'How often do you watch movies in English?'

TV series seem to be the most popular, as only a few participants watch them rarely (40.4%), but enjoy them either often (23.4%) or very often (23.4%, Figure 3.2).

When asked for how much time they spent watching TV series, the majority responded "from one to two hours" (40.4%) and for "one hour" (23.4%, Figure 3.3).
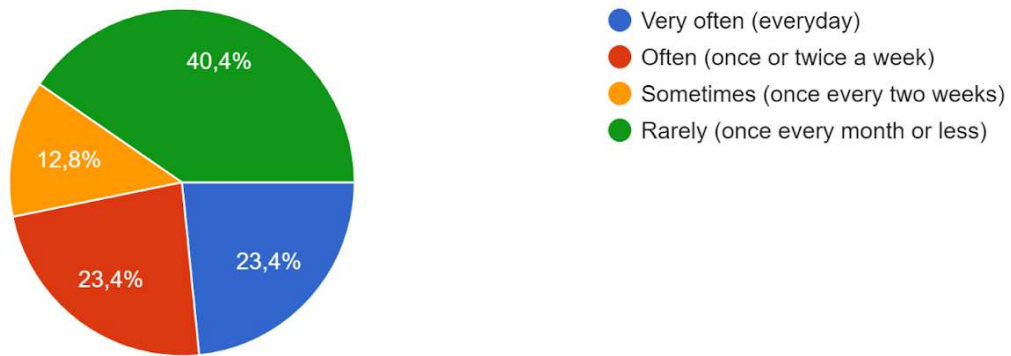
Figure 3.2 - 'How often do you watch TV series in English?'
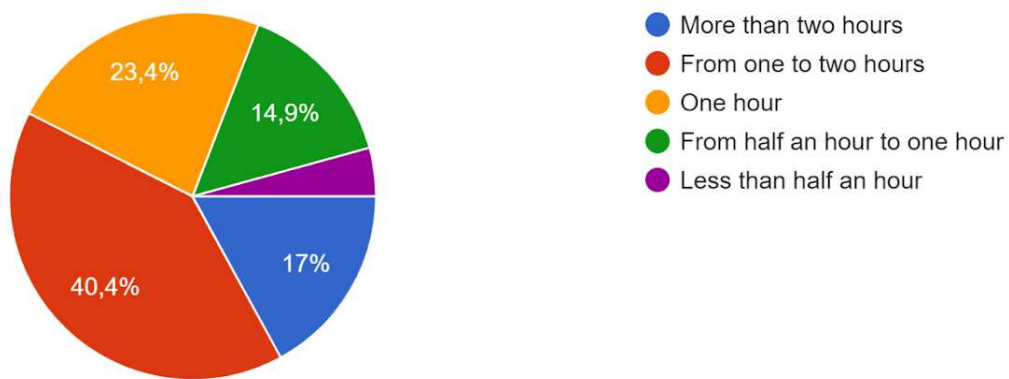
Figure 3.3 - 'How much time do you spend watching TV series?'

The next section of the survey examined why and how students like watching American and British movies. Out of the total number of participants who completed the questionnaire, just over half of them (55.3%) indicated that they watch content in English to learn the language. Also, the responses mostly chosen referred to the quality of the scenes (57.4%), to the intention to better understand British and American culture (36.2%), and to hear the dialogues in the original language (40.4%, Figure 4).

From Figure 4.1 we can see that 41.3% of the participants would rather watch movies in English rather than dubbed in Italian (21.7%), while 37% of them do not express a preference. Later on, participants were asked to motivate their choices. Those who said they like to watch movies dubbed in Italian did so because they find it hard to understand dialogues (53.2%), or they are used to watching them together with people who do not speak English (48.9%, Figure 4.2).

Meanwhile, the prevailing responses of those who preferred the original language were that they liked to listen to the actors' real voices (59.6%), they found the original dialogues more natural (57.4%), and because they wanted to learn the language (53.2%, Figure 4.3).
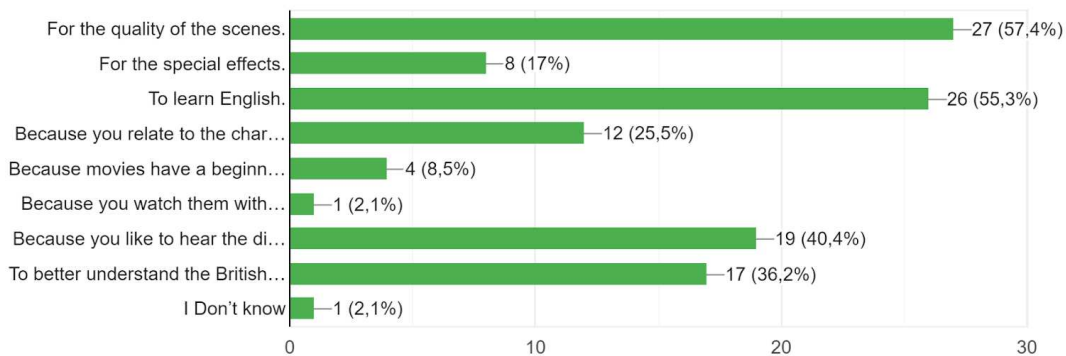
Figure 4 - 'Why do you like to watch British/American movies?'
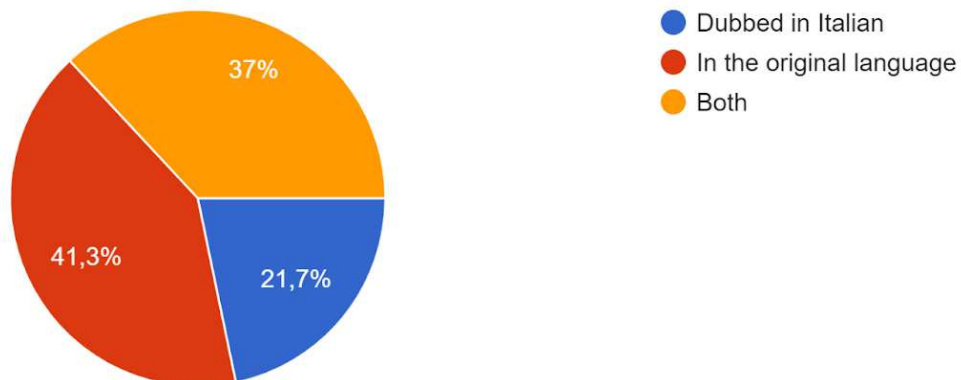
Figure 4.1 - 'How do you like watching British or American movies?'
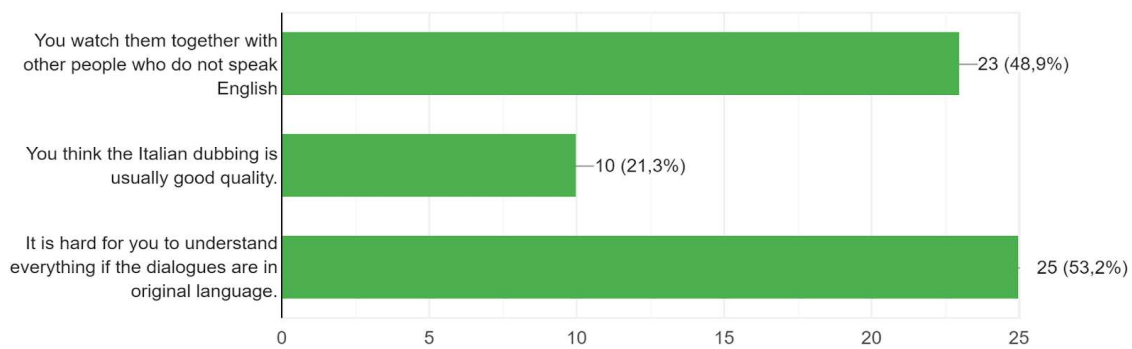
Figure 4.2 - 'If you watch movies dubbed in Italian you do it because:'

Figure 4.3 - 'If you watch movies in English (with or without subtitles), you do it because:'

If we now turn to TV series, we can find similar feedback. In the same way as with movies, the majority of the surveyed participants declared to watch TV series to learn English (51.1%), and take pleasure in listening to the dialogues (40.4%). However, two more responses resulted to be relevant, which are the tendency to like the aesthetics (44.7%), and attachment to characters (38.3%, Figure 5). Similarly to what happens with movies, 42.6% of the students prefer to watch TV series in English, yet Italian dubbed TV series are more popular (31.9%) than dubbed movies (Figure 5.1). The reasons for such choices are the same as for movies, with a slight increase due to the fact that the TV series they want to watch are not available in the original language (21.3%), as happens, for example, while watching them on Italian TV (Figure 5.2). Also, participants choose English because they have the desire to understand specific

58

aspects of the language that do not have a direct translation in Italian, such as typical expressions or jokes (46.8%, Figure 5.3).
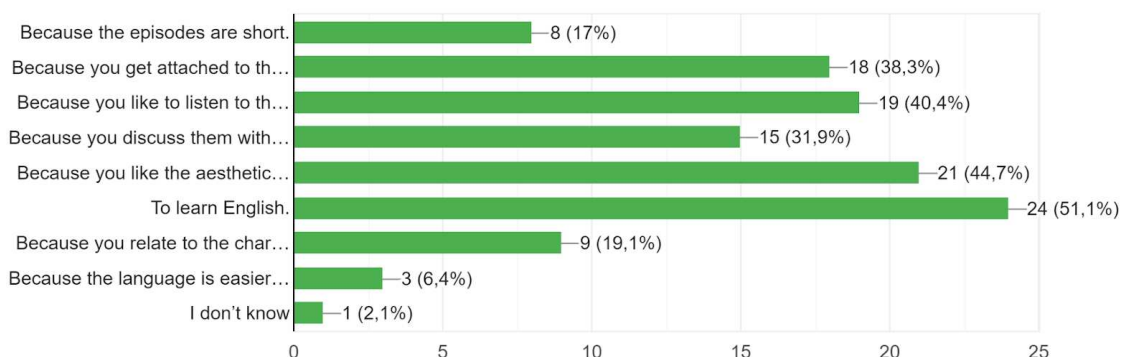
Figure 5 - 'Why do you like to watch British/American TV series?'
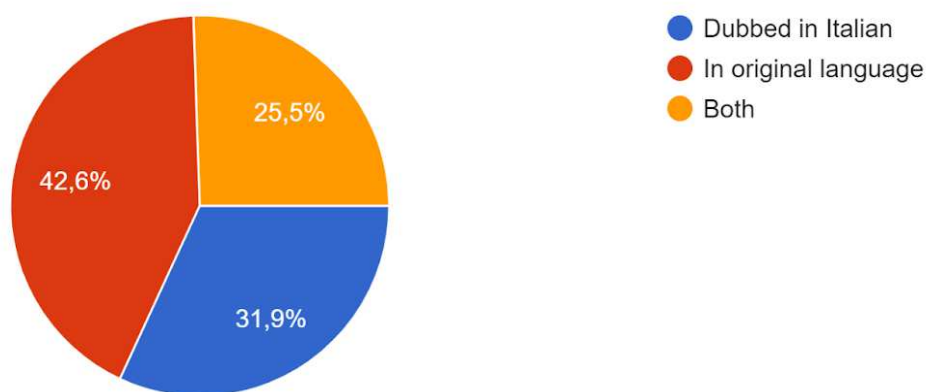
Figure 5.1 - 'How do you prefer to watch TV series?'
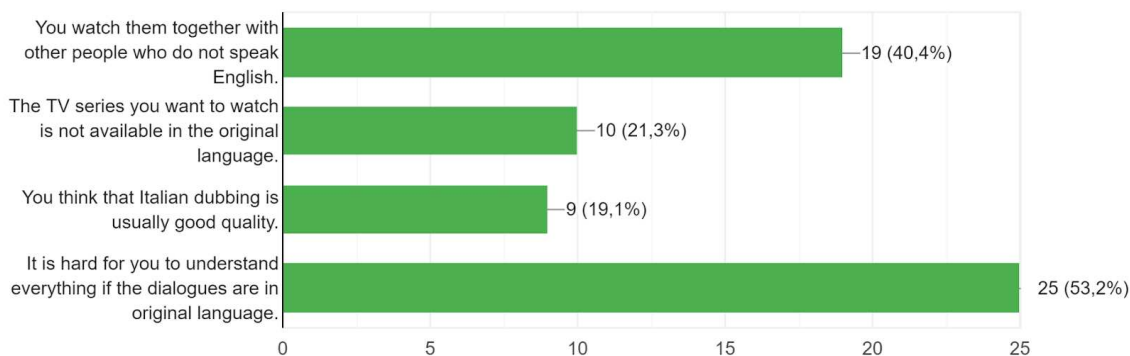
Figure 5.2 - 'If you watch TV series dubbed in Italian, you do it because:'
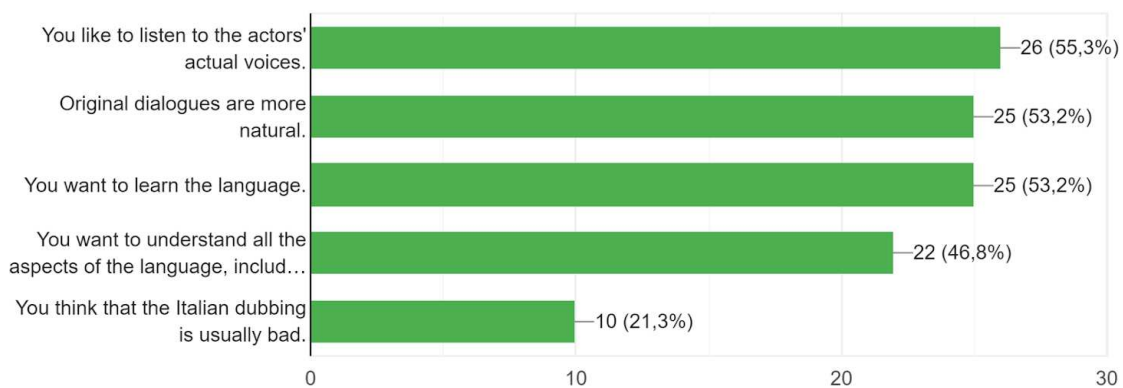
Figure 5.3 - 'If you prefer to watch TV series in English, you do it because:'

A closer inspection of the charts addressing subtitles highlighted the following results. The great majority (76.6%) of students who watch movies in English, watch them with subtitles. In particular, subtitles in English (66%, Figures 6 and 6.1).

In comparison to movies, more students watch TV series in English with subtitles (78.7%), and the same amount prefers subtitles in the original language (66%, Figure 6.1.1, and Figure 6.1.2).
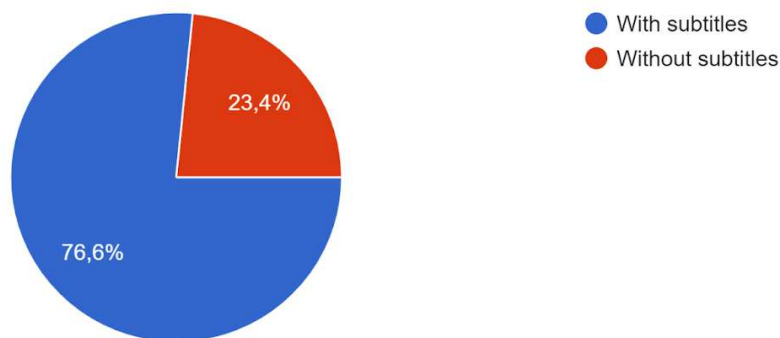
Figure 6 - 'If you watch movies in English, how do you watch them?'
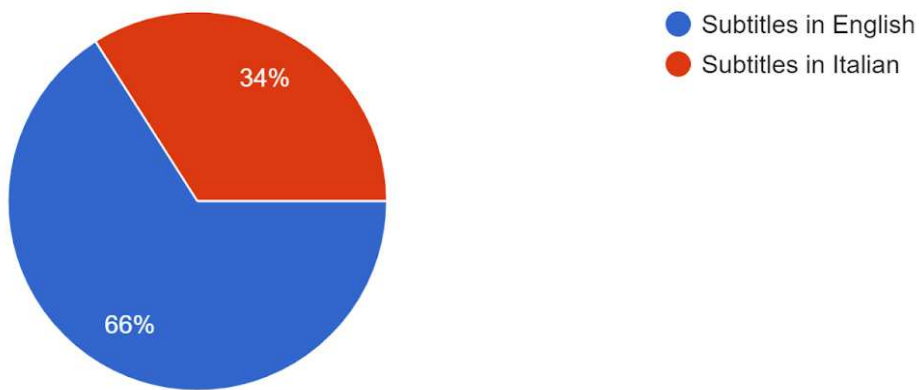
Figure 6.1 - 'If you watch movies in English with subtitles, which kind of subtitles do you prefer?'
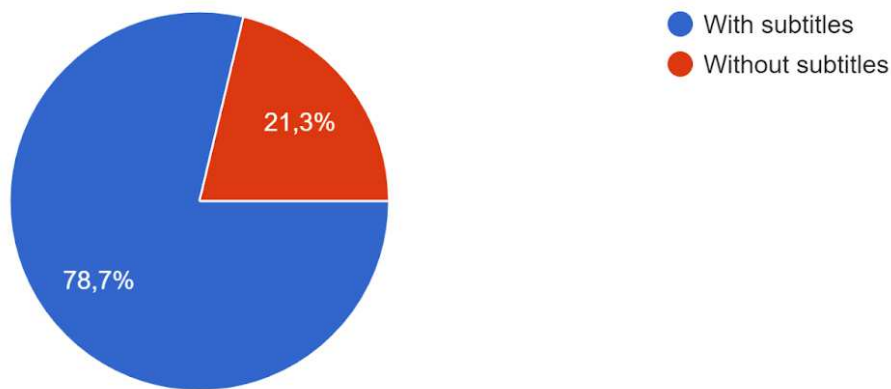
Figure 6.1.1 - 'If you watch TV series in English, how do you watch them?'
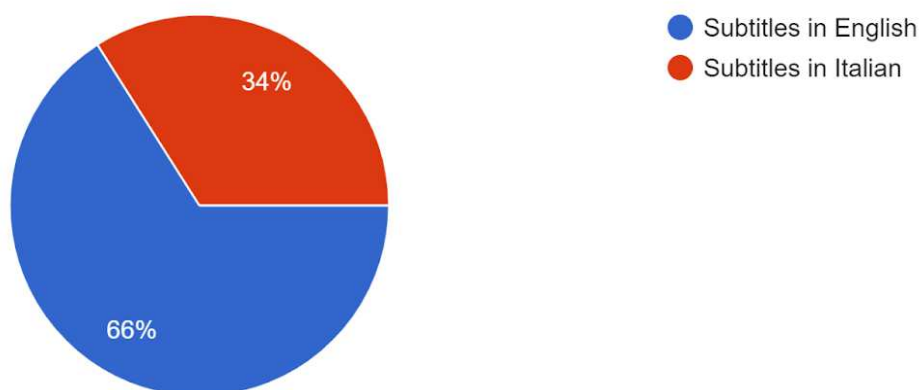
Figure 6.1.2 - 'If you watch TV series in English with subtitles, which kind of subtitles do you prefer?'

The graphs in Figures 7, 7.1 and 7.2 are quite revealing in several ways. Subtitles in English are found helpful to better understand the dialogues heard for both movies and TV series (72.3%, Figure 7). While subtitles in Italian are considered useful for the same reason (53.2%), they are also chosen because those who prefer them are interested in the translation of lines from English into Italian (34%), and because they read faster in their native language (27.7%, Figure 7.1).

The majority of the participants who do not watch either movies or TV series with subtitles (23.4% for movies and 21.3% for TV series) do so because they find them distracting from what is happening in the scenes (70.2% in Figure 7.2).
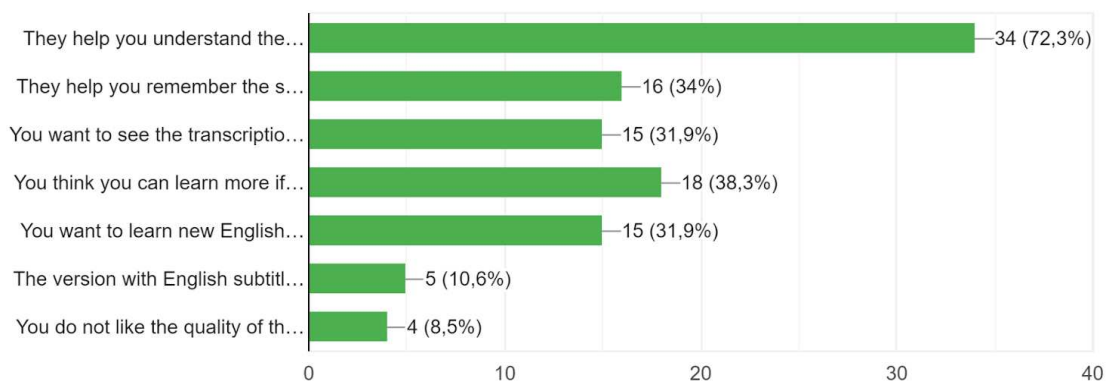
Figure 7 - 'If you watch movies/TV series subtitled in English, you do it because:'
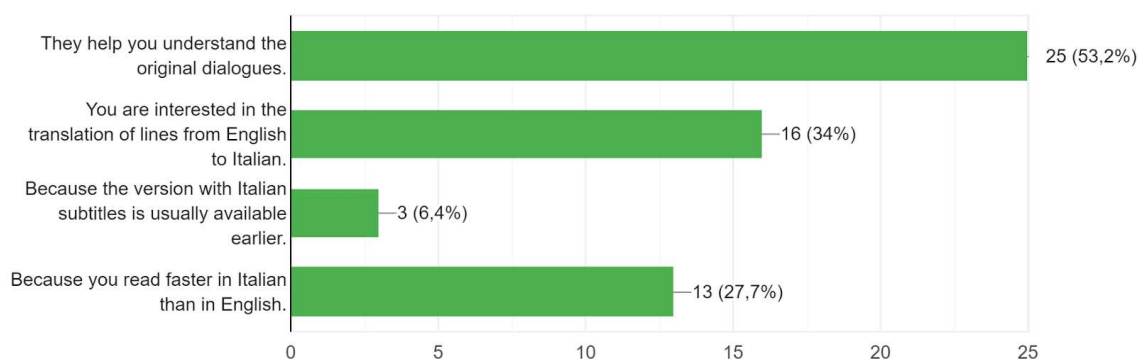
Figure 7.1 - 'If you watch movies/TV series in English subtitled in Italian, you do it because:'
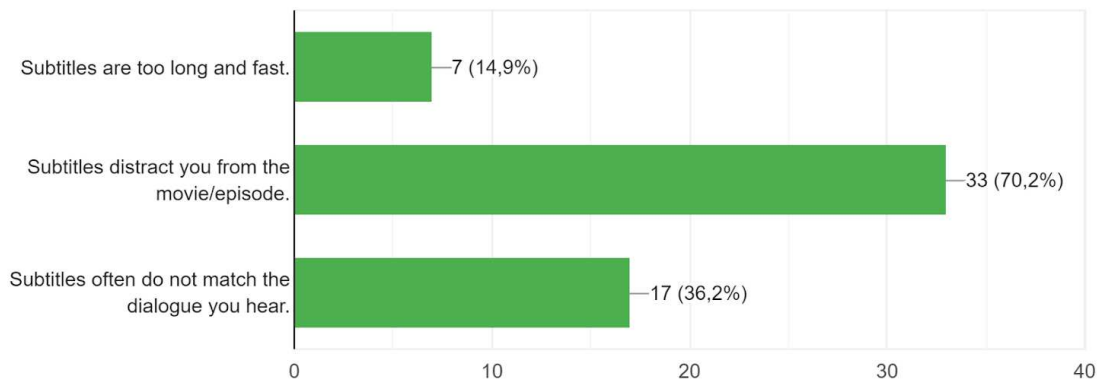
Figure 7.2 - 'If you watch movies/TV series in English without subtitles, you do it because:'

The next set of questions refers to the viewing platforms, and aims at understanding where and how students access movies and TV series in their free time. It is clear from the chart in Figure 8 that half of those who watch movies at home watch them on TV, while the other half watch them online at the computer. A minority (23.4%) enjoy movies at the cinema. Likewise, 61.7% of the participants like to watch TV series online with the computer (Figure 8.1). On the whole, students demonstrated a tendency to use the computer because they make use of viewing platforms, such as Netflix, where they can find TV series in the original language, and have more options to choose from than they do on TV. Also, many surveyed subjects mention family as a reason why they do not watch TV, as they seem to be the only ones who watch TV series at home, and seem to prefer to be alone when they do so. Additionally, a great number of participants stated that they prefer to be comfortable, either when watching TV or with the computer.
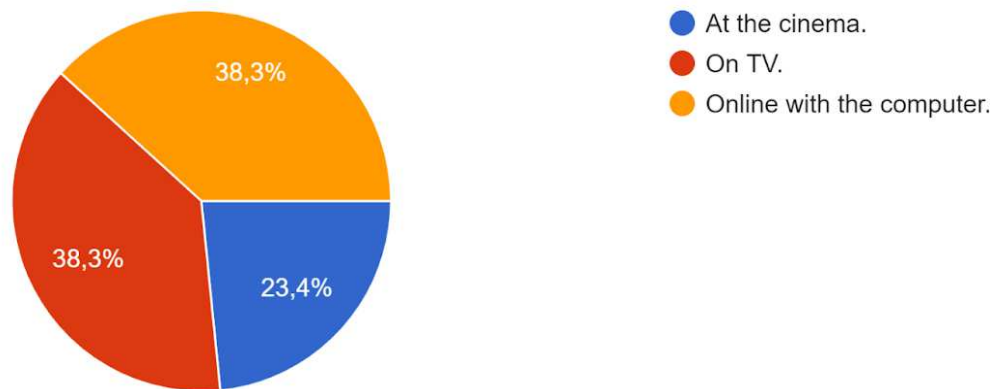
Figure 8 - 'You prefer to watch movies:'
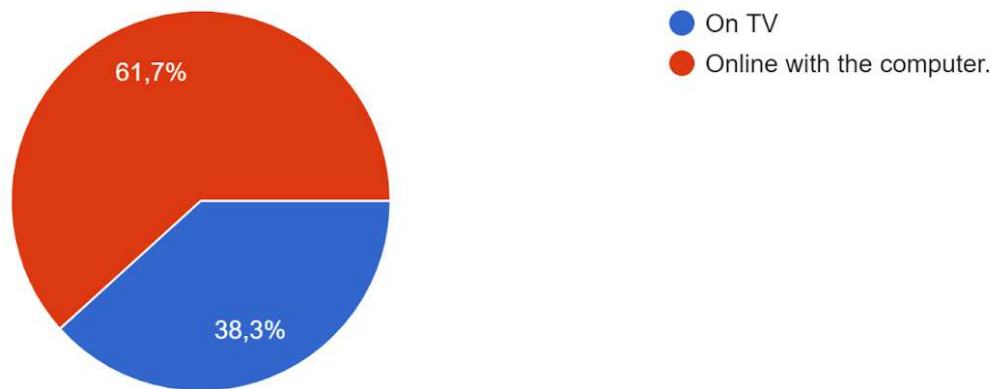
Figure 8.1 - 'You prefer to watch TV series:'

Furthermore, respondents were asked to indicate their favourite genre of British or American movies, and name some titles of their favourite TV series. Adventure (55.3%) and comedy (51.1%) were the top two favourite genres, followed by animation and action (both 40.4%). The least well-liked genre resulted to be horror (23.4%, Figure 9). Several of the most popular TV series mentioned by the students are American. They fall in the category of teen drama, such as *Stranger Things* (Duffer Brothers, 2016), *Riverdale* (Aguirre-Sacasa, 2017), *Outer Banks* (J. Pate, Pate, & Burke, 2020), *Euphoria* (Levinson, 2019) and *Teen Wolf* (Davis, 2011). British series are less popular,

but still quite present, yet *Peaky Blinders* (Knight, 2013) is the only one mentioned by more than one participant. American sitcoms appear to be popular, as several students mention series such as *Modern Family* (Lloyd & Levitan, 2009), *Brooklyn 99* (Goor & Schur, 2013), *How I met your Mother* (Bays & Thomas, 2005), and *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre & Prady, 2007).
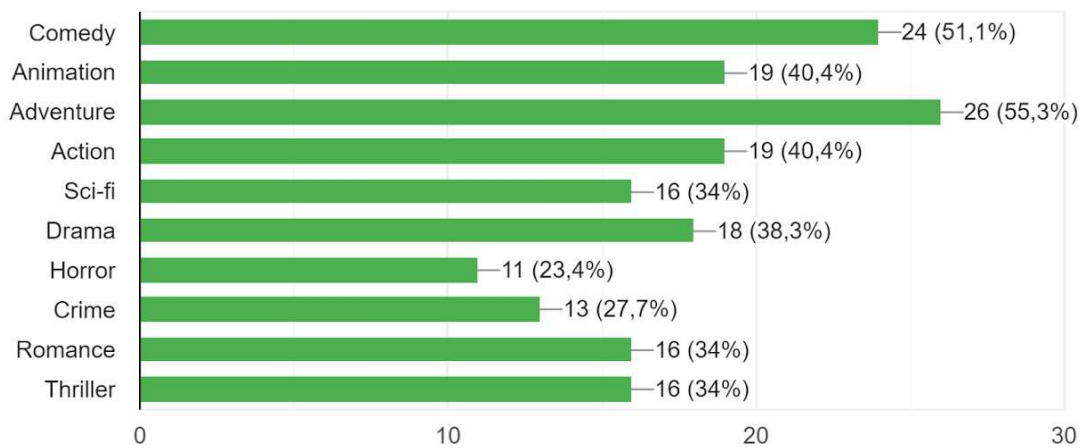
Figure 9 - 'If you watch British or American movies, which genres do you prefer?'

In addition, the survey included a question about other kinds of content students like to watch in English. The great majority (76.6%) watch a large number of YouTube videos, but also talk shows (44.7%) and documentaries (31.9%, Figure 10).
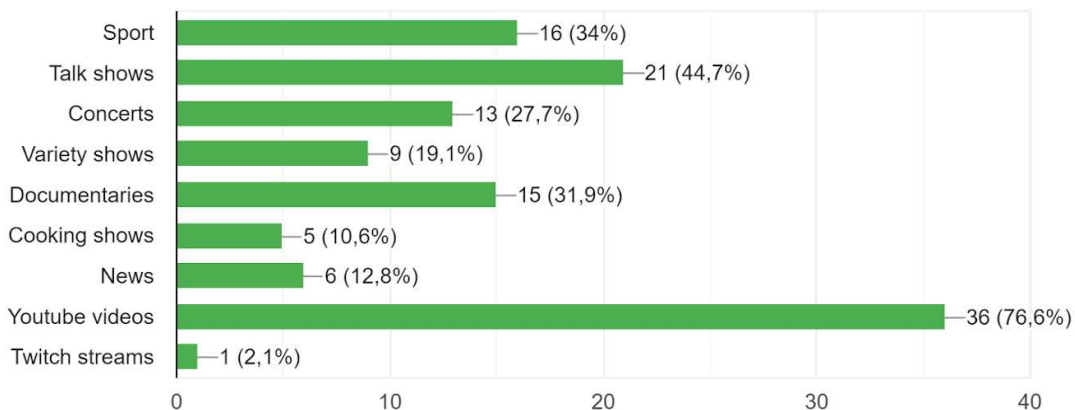
Figure 10 - 'Apart from TV series and movies, which other content do you like to watch?'

In the final part of the survey, respondents were asked about their perception of whether their language competence has improved by watching movies or TV series in English, either captioned or subtitled. As Figures 11 and 11.1 show, 80.9% of the participants responded positively, or "maybe" (19.1%). They identified the development in listening comprehension (89.4%), vocabulary (61.7%) and speaking production and interaction (53.2%). No students expressed a negative view on the usefulness of watching movies and TV series in English.
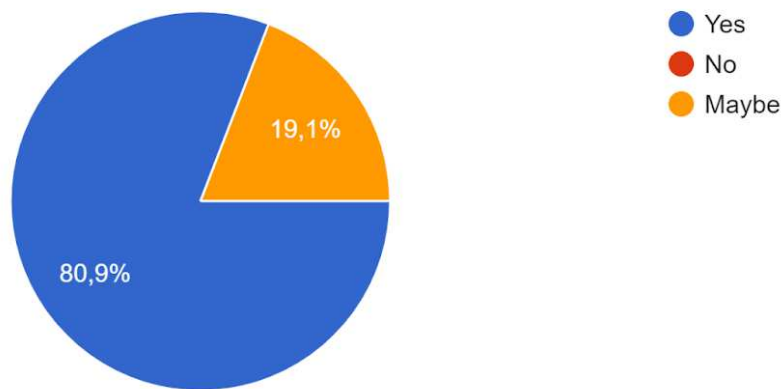
Figure 11 - 'Do you think that your English competence has improved by watching movies or TV series, either captioned or subtitled?'
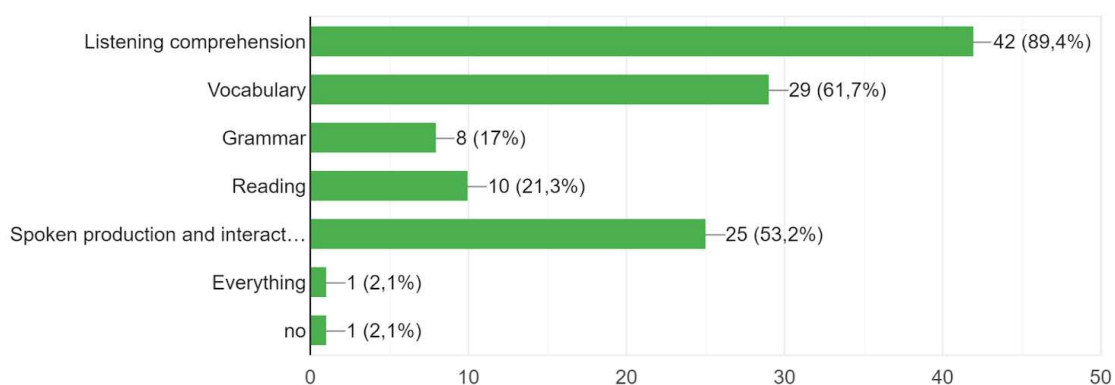
Figure 11.1 - 'If the answer to the previous question is "yes", which competence has improved the most?'

3.2 Pedagogical Experiment

The second part of the study aims at exploring student knowledge of TV series phraseology and at encouraging them to consider this kind of audio-visual material as a helpful resource when learning new English vocabulary, recurring expressions and conversational routines. The results collected by completing classroom activities demonstrate that supplementing traditional textbook-based teaching with watching popular American sitcoms can have positive effects on developing language proficiency. Furthermore, it is possible that they foster student motivation to learn and stimulate learners to continue practicing the language by watching TV series at home in their free time.

3.2.1 Warm-up Questions to Collect Student Opinions

Firstly, the warm-up questions had the purpose of collecting the students' opinions regarding the possibility of including watching American TV series as part of their English lessons. The first question of the brain-storming phase was whether they recognised the 'parkour' scene. 11 students answered that they did not recognise the scene, nor did they know the series it came from. Then, three students both recognised the scene and saw the series in its entirety. Finally, two students saw the scene because it went viral on the Internet, but they had never seen the series and only one student replied that he had never seen neither the scene nor the series, but expressed that he was very interested in it and would watch the whole show in the future.

When asked if they had ever thought that watching TV series could help people learn English, almost all (16) responded positively. Most of the collected opinions support the fact that watching TV series is the best way to learn the language. Among

the responses, one student argued that when one watches a TV series in English, even if they encounter a word or expression they do not know the meaning of, they will unconsciously remember that word. The next time they encounter it they are likely to remember it in relation to the former and current context of use and thus deduce its meaning. The word or expression will then be fixed in their mind and ready for use when speaking the language.

Other participants argue that watching films and TV series in the original language is useful for learning the language accidentally. That is to say, when viewers somehow relate to the story and recognise themselves in the characters, they are likely to forget about their didactic function and begin to understand the language naturally, without the effort of trying to make sense of anything they are listening to. They begin to deduce meanings from the context and associate them with their prior knowledge.

Other students mentioned the importance of watching English films and TV series in class, so as to also understand the use of words and forms of expressions that are often not taught in school, but are only learnt when interacting with native speakers. As secondary-school students do not always have the opportunity to converse with native speakers, it is useful for them to receive examples in class through TV series.

In general, the responses describe watching films and TV series in class as a fun and uncomplicated way of learning new vocabulary and grammatical structures. In addition, it can help with pronunciation and listening. One student also mentioned the usefulness of English captioning for learning new words.

The third question concerns whether they would find the integration of school books with the language of TV series enjoyable. Most of them agreed. One student expressed that it would be better to watch this type of content at home, because in this

way one concentrates more on the TV series and because teachers do not have time to show whole episodes. They do indeed have so much to cover already from the English curriculum. Another participant argued that it is always better to watch TV series rather than study. The misinterpretation of the activities revealed by such answers will be discussed in the next chapter. As has been mentioned, most of the responses were positive. Students find that carrying out such activities in the classroom can be fun and an engaging way to learn faster, since the language and consequently the dialogues are more interesting and dynamic than those proposed by textbooks.

3.2.2 Teaching Activities

3.2.2.1 Fill-in-the-blanks exercise (1)

After viewing the "First Aid Fail" scene, the students had to carry out a gap-fill exercise, where they had to choose the best term out of a list of pre-written words, while listening and reading the script of the scene. The exercise was divided into three excerpts. The first one is the following:

Excerpt 1:
List of words:
   a. All right
   b. basically
   c. bother
   d. come across
   e. Everyone
   f. I mean
   g. keep track
   h. Okay
   i. pace
   j. Right
   k. trick
   l. tune
   m. Well
   n. You know what

Michael: Where are they? 1)_____? If we 2)_____ somebody with no arms or legs do we 3) _____ resuscitating them? 4)_____, what kind of quality of life do we have there?

Kevin: I would want to live with no legs.

Michael: How about no arms? No arms or legs is 5)_____ how you exist right now, **Kevin**. You don't do anything.

Rose: 6)_____, well, let's get back to it. 'Cause you're losing him. Okay, too fast. 7)_____, we need to pump at a 8)_____ of a 100 beats per minute.

Michael: 9)_____, that's, uh, hard to 10)_____. How many is that per hour?

Jim: How's that gonna help you?

Michael: I will divide and then count to it.

Jim: 11)_____.

Rose: Okay. 12)_____, a good 13)_____ is to pump to the 14)_____ of 'Staying Alive' by the Bee Gees. Do you know that song?

Solution: 1-n, 2-d, 3-c, 4-f, 5-b, 6-a, 7-e, 8-i, 9-h, 10-g, 11-j, 12-m, 13-k, 14-l.

In general, most students completed all excerpts of the exercise correctly, resulting in an average of 13 correct and 4 incorrect answers for each word to choose. In the first excerpt the easiest word to enter was "bother", as 16 students responded correctly and only one student chose the incorrect word "everyone". The most difficult word to identify resulted to be the phrasal verb "keep track", with 10 correct placements and 7 incorrect answers that wrongly placed "I mean", "basically" and "tune" instead (Figure 12 and 13).
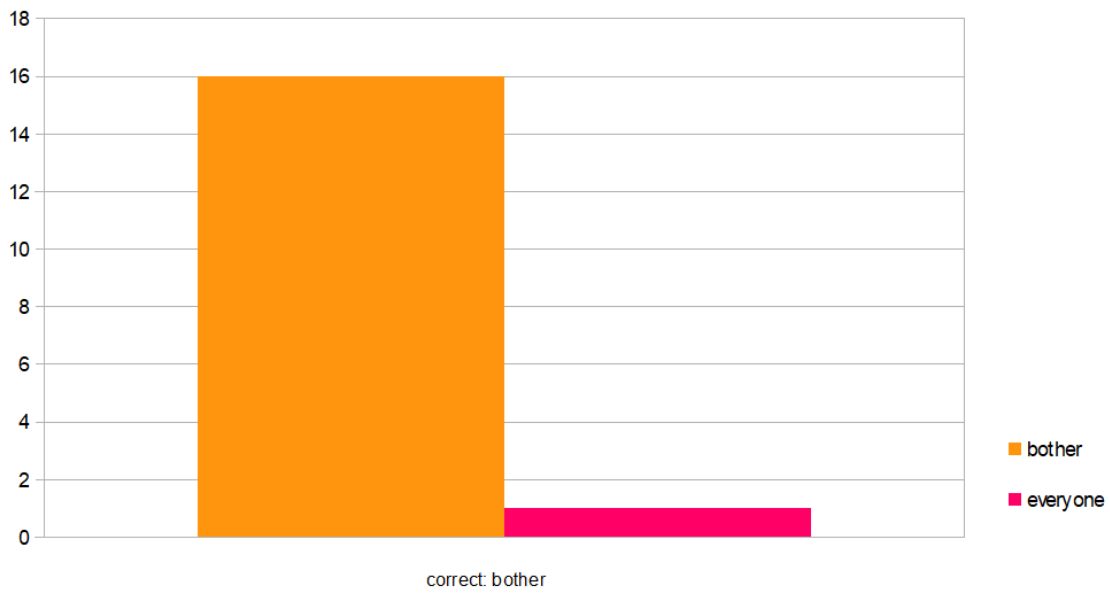
Figure 12 - results on filling the gap of the word "bother"
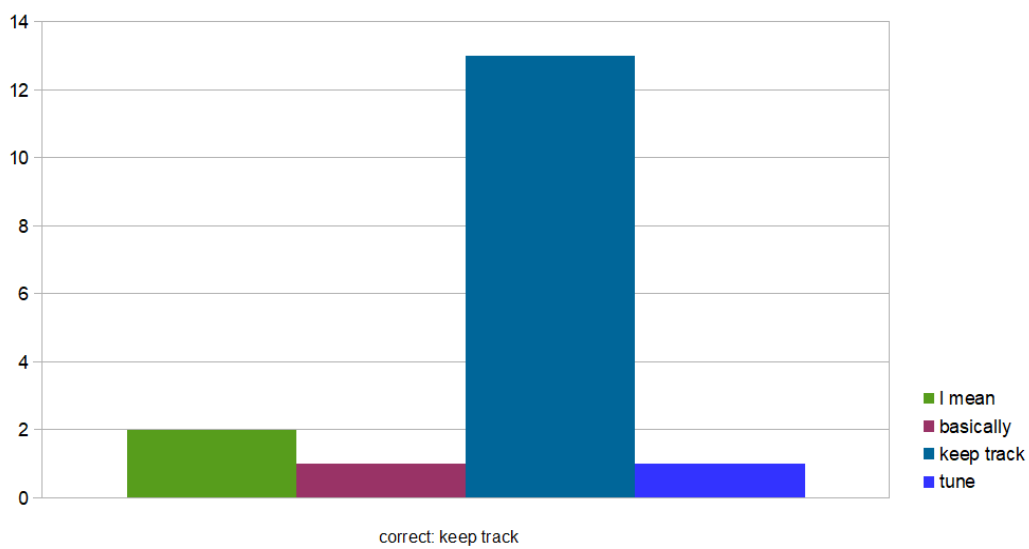
Figure 13 - results on filling the gap of the words "keep track"

3.2.2.2 Fill-in-the-blanks exercise (2)

As for the second excerpt, the students found it less difficult to choose and place the words in the correct sentences' gaps:

List of words:
- a. harvest
- b. organ donor
- c. What are you doing?
- d. here we go
- e. I have no idea
- f. Yeah
- g. Oh my God
- h. Are you okay
- i. Okay

Dwight: 1)_____, he's dead. Anyone know what we do next? Anybody? Rose?
Rose: 2)_____.
Dwight: Anyone else?
Phyllis: We bury him?
Dwight: Wrong. Ehh. Check for an 3)_____ card. If he has one, we only have minutes to 4)_____.
Creed: He has no wallet, I checked.
Michael: He is an organ donor.
Dwight: He is.
Michael: 5)_____.
Dwight: Get me some ice and a styrofoam bucket. 6)_____.
Angela: Oh my God! Dwight!
Kelly: Dwight!
Angela: 7)_____?
Dwight: We search for the organs. Where's the heart? The precious heart.
Stanley: I'm not feeling well. I need to sit down.
Michael: Hey, Stanley.
Andy: Stanley.
Michael: 8)_____?
Angela: 9)_____!
Stanley: Oh my God!
Angela: Dwight!
Dwight: Clarice?
Stanley: Oh my God!
Solution: 1-i, 2-e, 3-b, 4-a, 5-f, 6-d, 7-c, 8-h, 9-g.

The easiest word to place resulted to be "Okay", as only one student entered "here we go" instead. Students experienced difficulties in placing "yeah" (12 correct answers), and incorrectly completed the gap with "organ donor", "here we go" and "What are you doing?" (Figure 14 and 15).
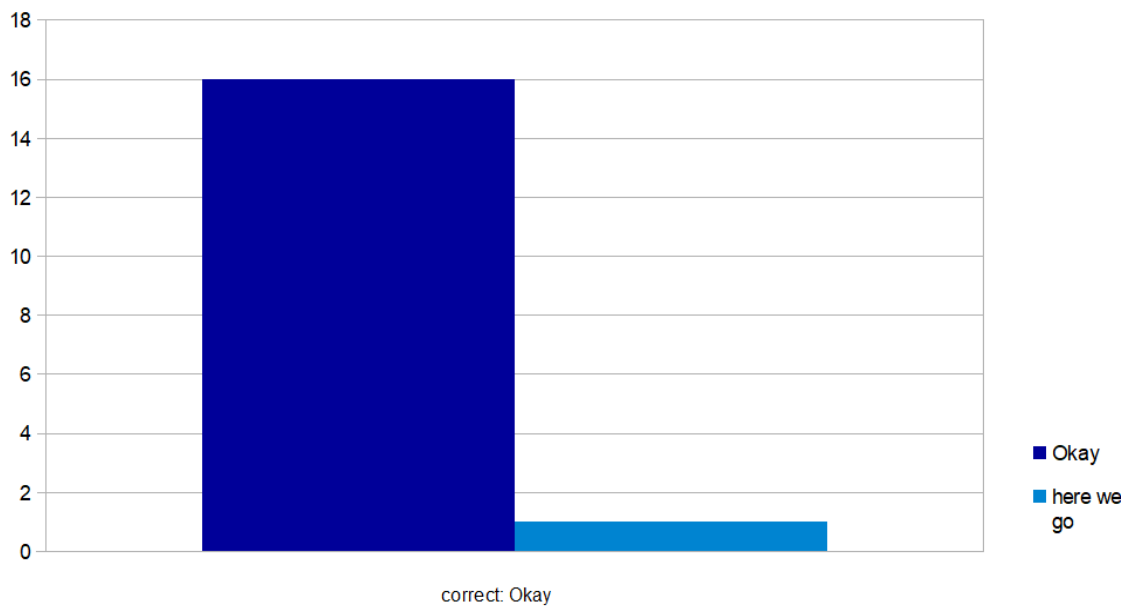
Figure 14 - results on filling the gap of the word "okay"
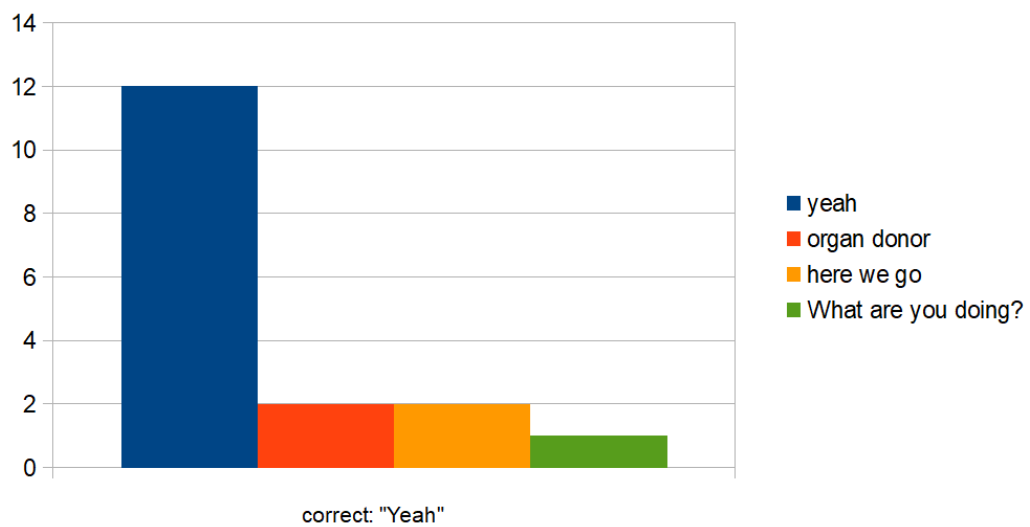
Figure 15 - Results on filling the gap of the word "yeah"

3.2.2.3 Fill-in-the-blanks exercise (3)

Finally, the students were asked to complete the third excerpt:

<u>Excerpt 3:</u>
List of words:
  a. pretty
  b. turns out
  c. cut the face off
  d. dummy
  e. look
  f. wow

David Wallace: Could you tell me why you had to 1)_____ the 2) _____?
Dwight: I didn't think it was very realistic in the movie and it 3)_____, it's 4)_____realistic.
David Wallace: We had to pay for it. Cost us thirty five hundred dollars.
Michael: Five thousand three hundred dollars for a dummy?
Dwight: 5)_____.
Michael: Okay, 6)_____. David, this is why we have training. We start with the dummy, and we learn from our mistakes. And now Dwight knows not to cut the face off of a real person.
solution: 1-c, 2-d, 3-b, 4-a, 5-f, 6-e.

The students had almost no difficulty in choosing the position for "cut the face off" and "turns out", as both reported 16 correct and one incorrect answers, being "turns out" instead of the correct "cut the face off", and "dummy" instead of the correct "turns out" (Figure 16 and 17). They had no particular problems in completing the rest of the excerpt correctly with an average of 15 correct and two incorrect answers for the other words.

correct: cut the face off
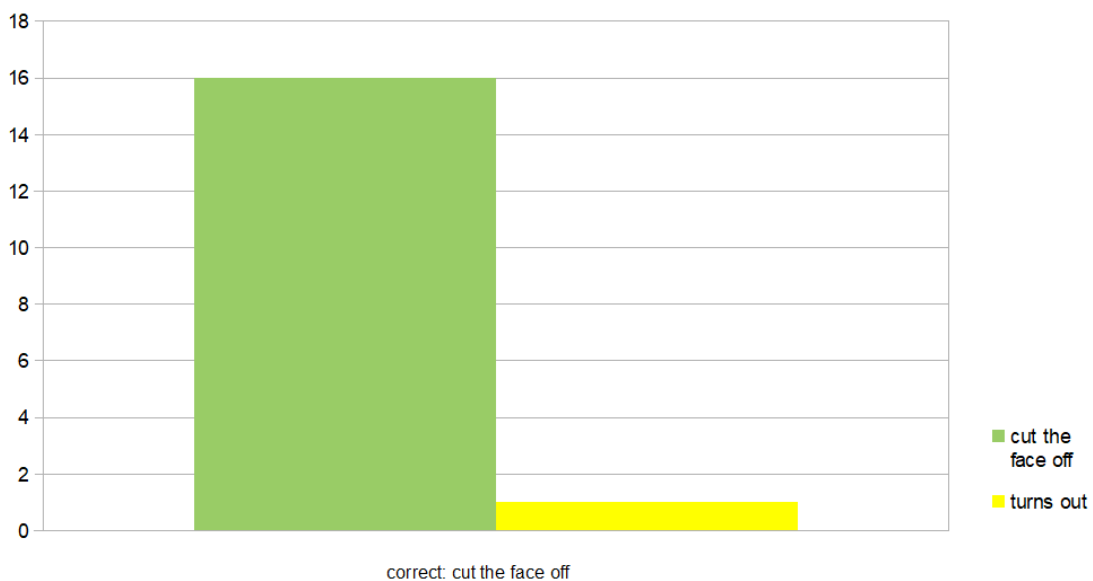
Figure 16 - results on filling the gap of the words "cut the face off"
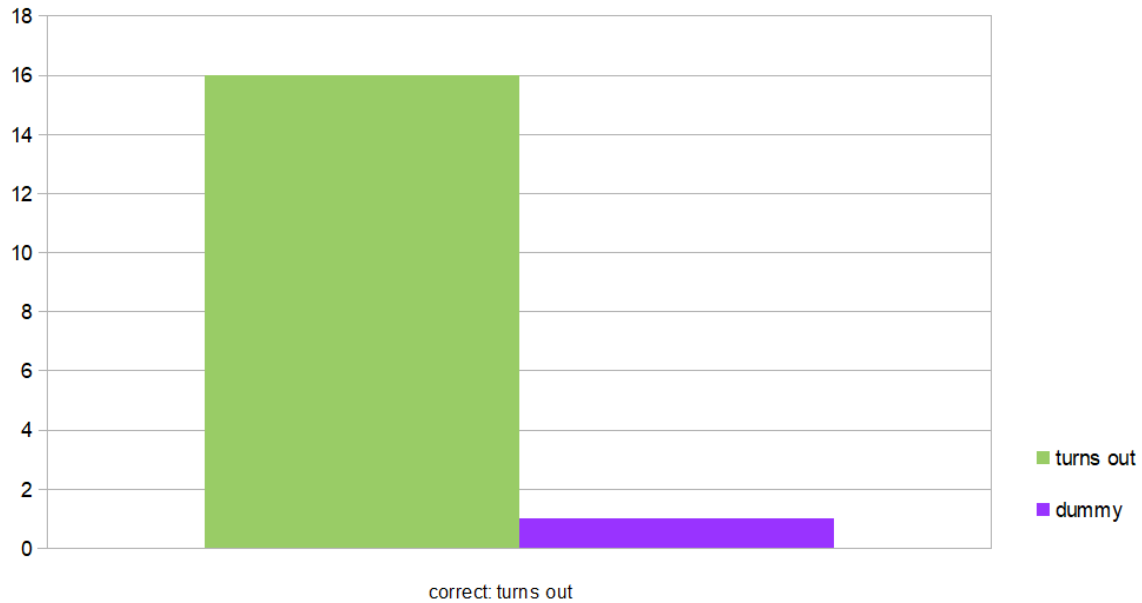
Figure 17 - results on filling the gap of the words "turns out"

Thus, the first excerpt was the one in which the students had the most problems in placing the words, while the third was the one in which most of them answered correctly.

3.2.2.4 Sentence completion

In the next exercise participants were asked to complete the sentences only by listening to the dialogues and watching the scene "Michael's injury". The whole script was not made available to them, only selected phrases were, presented as follows:

1. **Pam**: Michael, _____ call an ambulance?
   Michael: No, I want you to pick me up. (correct: do you need me to)
2. **Jim**: What is going on?
    Michael: I want to come to work. But I need you to come and _____. (correct: pick me up).
3. **Michael**: I a)_____ having breakfast in bed. I like waking up to the smell of bacon, sue me. And since I don't have a butler, I have to do it myself. So, most nights before I

go to bed, I will lay six strips of bacon out on my George Foreman Grill. Then I go to sleep. When I wake up, I plug in the grill, I go back to sleep again. Then I wake up to the b)_____ of crackling bacon. It is delicious, it's good for me. It's the perfect way to start the day. Today I got up, I stepped onto the grill and it c)_____ down on my foot... that's it. I don't see what's so hard to believe about that.   (correct: enjoy, smell, clamped).

4. **Dwight**: What is going on? What is going on?
    Pam: Michael, is, um, sick and he wants one of us to a)_____ him.
    Michael: I'm not _____! I'm burned! (correct: rescue, sick)
5. **Dwight**: _____ Michael! I am coming! Wait there!
    Michael: I don't want Dwight! (correct: hold on)
6. **Pam**: Michael, why don't you call your girlfriend?
    Michael: I don't have a girlfriend**.**
    Jim: But you said that you a)_____ with her this weekend.
    Michael: It was all b)_____. Just someone come, ok? Anyone. Anyone but Dwight.
    (correct: went out, made up)

This exercise turned out to be more difficult than the previous ones, as the students had to rely only on their listening skills and on their previous knowledge. On average, nine out of 17 students correctly identified all words in all sentences. But there were also some partially correct answers. In fact, on average five students gave partially correct answers, identifying one correct word out of two, but still trying to understand the missing word from the context. For example, in sentence 1, the correct formula was "do you need me to", seven participants answered correctly, while the others wrote similar sentences such as "do you want me to", "you need me to", or "shall I". In sentence 6, the participants successfully completed with "made up", but confused "went out" with "went over", which in the given context still makes sense. Another example can be found in sentence 3, where "enjoy" and "smell" have been correctly identified, while "clamped" in many cases has been replaced with "clipped" or "slipped", both of which may actually make sense in context. Therefore, even if the difficulty of the exercise was higher than the previous one, the students nevertheless performed positively, giving mostly correct or partially correct answers trying to deduce the meaning from the scene itself.

3.2.2.5 Matching activity

The last exercise was a matching activity, for which students were asked to reconstruct a dialogue about a reservation in a Bed and Breakfast, based only on listening to part of the conversation on the phone hearable in the scene "Dwight owns a Bed and Breakfast":

Script:
Dwight:
1. Dunder Mifflin, Dwight Schrute. Please hold.
2. Schrute Farms, guten tag. How can I help you?
3. Yes, we have availability on those nights. How many in your party?
4. Oh no, I'm sorry, no king beds.
5. No queen either. Well, we make our own mattresses that don't conform to the traditional sizes. Closest would be twin.
6. Thank you so much for calling. Call back again. Aufedersein!

To pair with (non-hearable):
a. Two, do you have any double room? With king bed?
b. Well, no thank you. We changed our minds.
c. All right. Goodbye.
d. I am calling to book a stay at the Bed and Breakfast. Do you have any available rooms on the last weekend of May?
e. So, maybe queen size then?
f. Good morning, is this Schrute Farm's number?

Solution: 1-f, 2-d, 3-a, 4-e, 5-b, 6-c.

Students mostly had problems in identifying the first sentence, as 13 responses correctly answered with "Good morning, is this Schrute's Farm's number?" while four students incorrectly chose sentences that were to be put in the middle or at the end of the dialogue, such as "All right. Goodbye". Also, the opening sentence was misplaced by three students in response to "No queen either. Well, we make our own mattresses that don't conform to the traditional sizes. Closest would be twin", which does not make sense, as it starts with "Good morning". Overall, most of the students gave positive results, as on average 14 out of 17 participants correctly matched the sentences to what they heard and reconstructed the dialogue in its entirety.

3.3 Feedback on the Activities

At the end of the lesson, students were asked questions aimed at gathering their feedback on the activities just carried out. The first question addressed the series *The Office* and asked the participants if they found the proposed scenes enjoyable. Most of the students (76.5%, figure 18) answered 'yes', 11.8% were unsure and 11.8% answered 'no'.
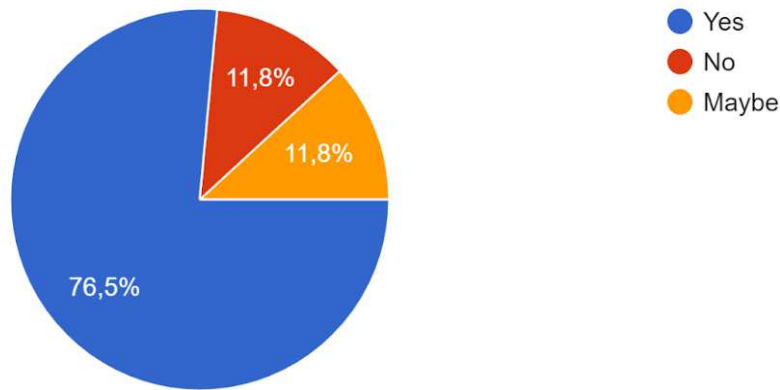
Figure 18 - "Did you enjoy the scenes from the TV show "The Office"?

The following set of questions were asked to gather opinions about the level of difficulty of the activities. As can be seen from Figure 19, when asked if the activities were too difficult for their English level, 76.5% said 'no', and 17.6% answered 'maybe'.
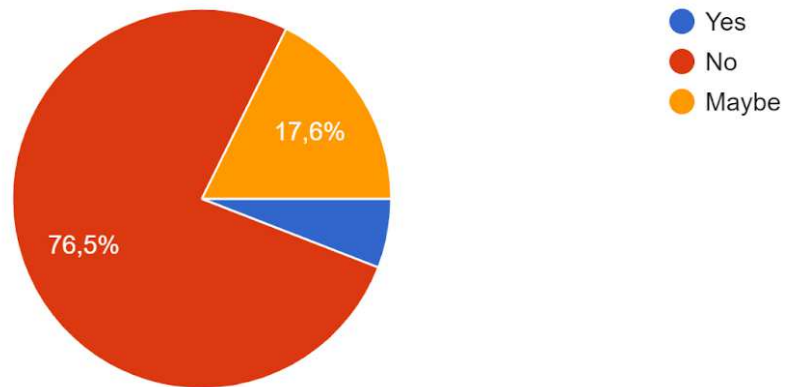
Figure 19 - "Did you find the activities too difficult for your current English level?"

The next question was concerned with how many English expressions students already knew and used. The results displayed in Figure 20 report that almost half of the interviewed (41.2%) answered that they already knew several terms, and almost the same amount of students responded that they knew some of them (29.4%), and about half of them (23.5%). In spite of these results, most of the participants (70.6%, Figure 21) found the exercises helpful for learning new words of natural speech, and 23.5% thought they could be useful, but were not sure.
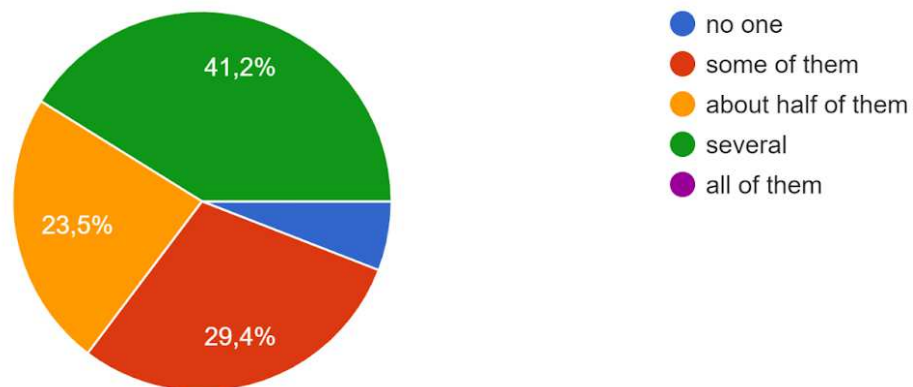
Figure 20 - "How many English terms seen in the activities did you already know and use?"
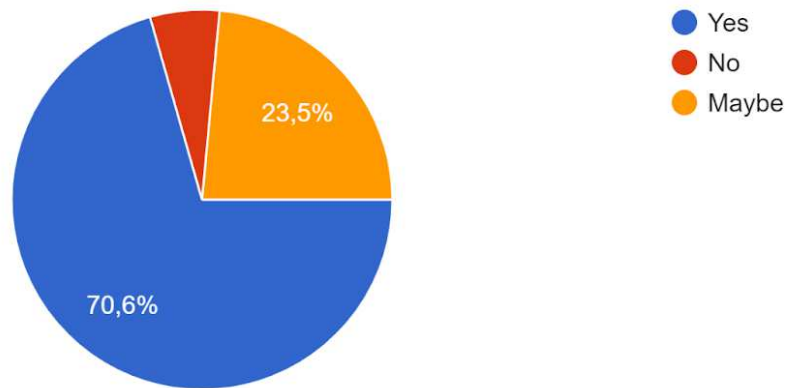
Figure 21 - "Were the activities useful for learning new words of natural speech?"

In addition, students commented on the environment created during the lesson. Alongside the comments collected during the brainstorming session about how it would be enjoyable to do this kind of exercises in school, the majority of students (64.7%) stated that completing these kinds of exercises as part of the English lesson would create a more relaxed learning environment, in which they would feel more confident to speak openly. Figure 22 also shows that 35.5% of students are still not sure of the outcomes that attending such a lesson might have.
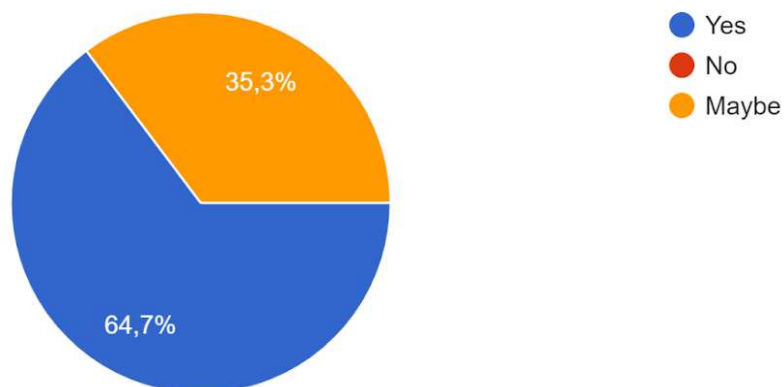
Figure 22 - "Do you think that doing this kind of exercises during the English class would create a more relaxed learning environment (rather than, for example, just doing the activities on the textbook?"

Finally, the participants were asked if watching parts of TV series at school would stimulate them to watch them at home too. About half of them responded 'maybe' (52.9%, Figure 23), alongside the 41.2% that responded 'yes', and only one participant would not do it.
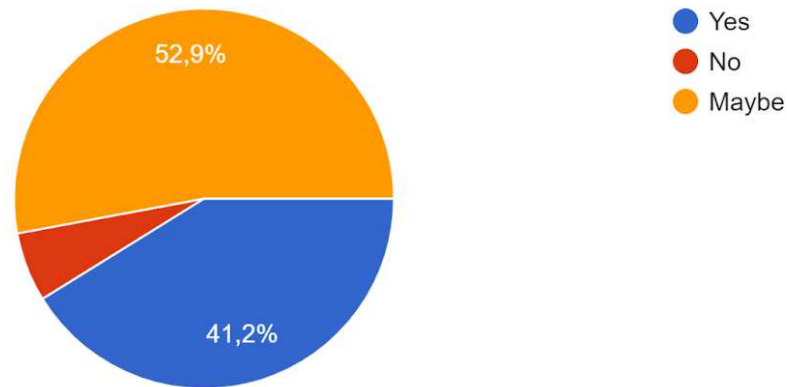
Figure 23 - "Do you think that watching this kind of videos at school would stimulate you to watch them at home too?"

3.4 To Sum Up

The aim of the research was to investigate student habits and frequency of watching English-language TV series and films at home in their spare and leisure time. Furthermore, the study has focused on the reasons why students consume this kind of content in their free time in a non-school environment, and which are the benefits they could receive from doing so. The majority of the respondents speak one or more foreign languages besides their mother tongue. One of them is English, which they started

learning at the age of six. Hence, at the time of the research they described themselves as being at an intermediate level of English. In addition, about one third of them had spent a period of one to three weeks in an English speaking country.

Results suggested that participants watch both TV series and films in English in their spare time from once a month to once or twice a week, each time for one or two consecutive hours. Students watch films and TV series in English for various reasons. They seem to like the quality of the scenes and dialogues in the original language because of the actors' real voices and their naturalness. If they watch them in Italian, it is because they want to better understand the dialogues, or because they are watching them together with non-English speakers. With regards to subtitles, they generally prefer English rather than Italian, so they can expand their knowledge of the language, and better understand what they hear in the scenes. Students stated that at times they would use English captions to better understand the dialogues and grasp all the linguistic nuances, in particular humour and expressions which are not easily translatable. Then, most of the surveyed students watch movies and TV series at home on computers by themselves making use of popular on-demand streaming services. Indeed, they expressed the need to feel comfortable and without external interruptions. Adventure and comedy movies turned out to be among their favourite genres, and teen-drama and American sitcoms among the most mentioned genres of TV series. Another popular form of content in English that students watch in their free time are YouTube videos. Students believe that watching audio-visual materials in English can improve their listening comprehension, vocabulary, speaking production and desire to interact in the L2.

The objective of the second part of the study was to test the proficiency of students who already have experience in watching American and British movies and TV series in the original language. Also, the aim was to introduce sitcoms in the English classroom, as a useful resource for both teachers and students. The results obtained from the activities presented in the classroom should confirm the hypothesis that prolonged exposure to TV language can have benefits on the development of English knowledge from various points of view: grammar, vocabulary (including phraseology), pragmatics, and listening skills.

During the practical lesson, the opinions of participants highlighted that watching TV series could be the best way to passively learn language while enjoying it. Also, they would find it enjoyable to watch TV series during the English lesson because they would learn faster and in a fun way. On average, the results of the exercises were positive, with approximately two thirds of the participants giving all correct answers in the gap-fill, listening comprehension and matching activities. The same amount of students found the scenes and the exercises enjoyable, neither too difficult nor too easy. In fact, the majority already knew several terms, or some of them, but still found the activities helpful in learning new words. Additionally, most of the participants thought that completing the activities based on *The Office* created a pleasant and relaxed learning environment, and that they would be likely to feel encouraged to watch sitcoms in English at home thanks to viewing them in class.

Chapter 4: Discussion, conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter provides conclusions based on research findings from qualitative data collected on learning English as L2 with sitcoms, as well as discussion and recommendation for future research. The purpose of the study was to investigate the phraseology of the 2000s sitcom *The Office* as a tool for developing Italian secondary school students' knowledge of conversational English. Research questions focused on the participants' extent of exposure to the English language , as well as on the kinds of inputs, viewing frequency and preferences regarding genre, subtitles and dubbing. Moreover, the study investigated students' language competences on a practical level in relation to TV phraseology, and researched the grade of effectiveness of sitcoms in the school context for the acquisition of informal English.

Previous studies showed the advantages of watching movies and TV series in the L2 and revealed general progress in proficiency, both when testing language learners who received English inputs in class or at school. Compared to textbooks, movies and TV series have been considered more authentic resources of language examples, because of their variety of contexts, interactions and interlocutors. Such a statement has been confirmed by corpus research, which identified in TV language recurrent vocabulary and patterns that mimic natural conversation. Among all genres, situation comedies have been identified as the most suitable for ESL teaching, as they pair authenticity with humour, resulting in an enjoyable and motivational learning experience for students. However, no study had so far investigated the helpful role that sitcoms could have inside the class. To address this gap the present research made use of corpus linguistics and a two-step study comprising a questionnaire and practical activities, to learn about the experience of Italian secondary school students with

extramural input, and gather results on the usefulness of it as a learning tool in the English class. The present study has investigated exactly this and has revealed that most of the participants sometimes watched movies and TV series in English because they appreciated the real voices of the actors, and used original language subtitles because they wanted to understand dialogues better. Thanks to this, the majority correctly completed the activities proposed in class, recognizing the terms already seen and quickly learning the new ones. Students enjoyed the scenes chosen from "The Office" and admitted that viewing them created a pleasant, relaxed and stimulating environment for learning, which they would like to be exposed to more often, both at school and at home.

4.1 Discussion

This two-step study has confirmed the main hypothesis that prolonged viewing of films and TV series in English can help students learn authentic English, providing useful examples of informal language, often neglected by textbooks, yet used daily by native speakers. Furthermore, the research has found positive effects in integrating sitcoms into the classroom, not only from a linguistic point of view but also from a motivational, and aptitudinal perspective. In what follows, findings are discussed and compared to previous research, to answer the research questions previously formulated.

4.1.1 Italian Students EE Viewing Frequency Compared to Previous Studies

First, the extent of extramural exposure to English among Italian secondary students appeared to be noticeably inferior to intermediate level students from the North of Europe. Most of the Italian secondary students that participated in the study reported

that they usually watch movies and TV series in English once a month, once or twice a week and only TV series every day, for about two consecutive hours. With their study, Olsson and Sylven (2015) found that English plays an important role in the lives of Swedish students, who spend over two hours a day engaging in activities that require them to make use of English. More specific insights are given by Sylven and Sundqvist (2012) who explored the learning benefits of video games. Participants were asked to keep a diary and log in the kind of extramural activities they were engaging in for how long. Results showed that, on average, Swedish students were spending 9.4 hours per week doing such activities. The most popular one seemed to be playing digital games, followed by watching TV (2.1 hours per week), listening to music, watching films (1.3 hours per week) and using the internet. Therefore, such studies have highlighted how English pervades the lives of Swedish students in comparison to Italians. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that Swedish television is not dubbed, but rather American and British TV series, movies, news, talk-shows, documentaries, etc., are broadcasted in the original language. Students are likely to benefit from it, having access to audio-visual material in English from an early age. In contrast, despite receiving captioned input, Pavesi and Ghia (2020) suggest that Italian students who participated in their study registered encouraging trends in the growing incidence of extramural contact with English. A similar tendency was found in the present research group, who are attending a high school specialising in modern languages. This is a significant factor, as the election of a foreign language-oriented course could translate into a desire of living "internationally" (Olsson and Sylven, 2015), and therefore a desire to take part more frequently in extramural English activities than other students (Coskun and Mutlu 2017: 585).

4.1.2 Preference Towards Captioned TV Series in English: Authenticity and Multimodality Discussed in the Context of Interaction and Language Acquisition

From the questionnaire it also emerged that one of the primary reasons students watch both movies and TV series is to learn English. In particular, they prefer to do so watching TV series, as learning the language resulted to be the main reason for over half of the participants when interviewed about this type of input. Other reasons included the spontaneity of the dialogues and the desire to listen to the jokes and typical expressions in the original language.

On the one hand, these findings are in line with previous literature on the topic that suggests that TV series indicate how English native speakers playing multidimensional characters communicate with each other in a wide variety of situations and contexts. That is why students find them useful examples of authentic English in context to follow when they want to practice the language.

On the other hand, these findings confirm those of previous studies which indicate that one of the main factors that help students learn English is the multimodality of audio-visual material. As mentioned by students' preferences reported in the survey, even better outcomes can be achieved by adding captions to the bimodal audio and visual stimulation.

From the present research it has emerged that most participants prefer to watch TV series with English captions, rather than with Italian subtitles or dubbing. Reasons vary from the desire to listen to the actors' real voices to willingness to improve their English knowledge. This agrees with Shabani's (2015: 126) research, which states that "human beings are able to recall 10% of what they hear, 10% of what they visually perceive and 80% of what they visually perceive and interact with". That is to say, when

watching captioned materials, students are not only watching and listening, but are also interacting with it as they read the words and associate them with what they are hearing. Willing to understand the scenes, students tend to put more attention to captions and focus on the spelling of words, which in return leads to more retention of new language forms. A large number of studies support captions as a tool for language learning, as they have positive effects on vocabulary learning. Similarly, Caimi (2006: 2) suggests that, when watching captioned videos, the student learning process is facilitated, as they link pronunciation with the written form which they might be more familiar with. Such written input "adds confidence and security", which encourages students to keep on learning. It is important to mention that the survey revealed that a large number of participants prefer to watch TV series with English captions, rather than movies with the same on-screen text. Paired with their motivation for learning the language, the students' responses agree with research conducted on TV series that identified it as a more authentic source for EFL learning.

The second students' preference resulted to be watching TV series with subtitles in Italian. Beside wanting to better understand the dialogues, participants are interested in seeing how English expressions and jokes were translated into Italian. This might be related to the fact that they are attending a foreign-language oriented high school. English to Italian translation might directly appeal to their interests because they might want to continue studying such subject in university.

In short, the vision of TV series in English, especially when captioned, can lead students to better retain new linguistic information, including vocabulary, grammar structures, recurring colloquial expressions and conversational routines. Learning motivation is also fostered, but can vary from genre to genre, as the study shows.

4.1.3   Learning Motivation and Confidence as a Result to Watching Situation Comedies

According to the findings of the questionnaire, along with adventure, one of the most preferred genres of movies turned out to be comedy, and a great number of participants' favourite TV series were situation comedies as well. In fact, almost all of the students liked the video clips of the sitcoms *The Office* and felt stimulated to continue watching even though they did not previously come in contact with the show. Only one participant did not enjoy the scenes. If we consider the favourite series listed by students in the survey, several resulted to be teen dramas or adventure British series, so it is possible that this particular student who did not enjoy *The Office* might have stated his preference among those. It is true that teen dramas usually appeal more to high school students, as they depict characters living in similar context, and dealing with similar issues as them, yet the comedy and relatability of *The Office* still attracted the students; despite it being set in an American office documenting the lives of working adults.

As a matter of fact, pairing the learning of English with viewing amusing content has shown positive effects on students' motivation and confidence. Out of all genres of TV series, only sitcoms offer rule-breaking patterns of conversations and commentary that can help audiences interpret the use of language in various ways. Washburn (2001: 23) suggests that "the fact that there are violations may help language learners recognize the limits or boundaries of speech routines, and the verbal commentary provides feedback on how the participants react to the violation". This is how humor is created, whose presence determines authenticity, and generates laughter and relatability to characters on the viewer's part.

Hence, the relatability and familiarity often depicted in sitcoms seem to have positive effects on students' learning process. As Valizadeh (2022: 38) states, "we seem to learn things best when we see things as part of a recognised pattern when our imagination is stimulated when we make natural associations between one idea and another and when the information appeals to our senses". So, by presenting language in the form of familiar speech routines spoken by relatable characters helps to understand the language structure in their socio-cultural context where communication originates. For this reason, the use of sitcoms as part of the English lesson can foster students' motivation and reduce the negative effects of mental factors, such as anxiety and the fear of making mistakes.

This was clear during the second part of the study, where students could complete the activities in a more relaxed and non-judgemental classroom environment. The lessons have been designed for the sole purpose of this research, therefore no pressure was put on marks or no specific results were expected from the participants. This agrees with Krashen's (1982: 30) hypothesis of the 'affective filter', according to which maximum results are achieved in similar context because "language learning must take place in an environment where learners are 'off the defensive' and the affective filter (anxiety) is low for the input to be noticed and gain access to the learners thinking". Indeed, during the in-class exercises, such setting seemed to have positively influenced the students' performance, as they stated in their feedback.

4.1.4 The Positive Outcomes of the In-class Activities and the Feedback of the Participants

Finally, almost all the surveyed respondents reported that they feel their English competence has improved by watching movies or TV series in English, either subtitled or captioned, and mostly referred to their listening comprehension, vocabulary knowledge and spoken production. As far as vocabulary and listening comprehension are concerned, these hypotheses were confirmed in the second part of the study. That is, the positive results registered after completion of the in-class activities showed that students who are already familiar with TV series phraseology are likely not to find it difficult to recognize and understand typical TV vocabulary, grammar and pragmatic routines. They also felt more motivated to learn both inside and outside of the English class. Accordingly, Vijayakumar et al. (2020) suggest that the more learners watch contents in English, the more the language impacts their daily life. In their study it was found that most of the students who regularly watch TV series in English have unconsciously gained some typical phrases that they often hear from them and have incorporated them into their way of communicating in a given language, making them comfortable when speaking to natives. Therefore, the majority of correct answers could be linked with the questionnaire's results, which showed that students already had experience in watching authentic TV contents.

In a nutshell, watching sitcoms in English with captions appears to accelerate the process of learning in regard to listening comprehension, extension of vocabulary, and oral production (Hlozkova, 2013). Additionally, students can acquire confidence when interacting, improve their communication techniques and be more motivated to put them into practice at school, as well as in their free-time. Such exposure could be

replicated within the school context with the use of sitcoms as a learning aid, in this case the American show *The Office*, to give students the possibility to learn informal and natural language, often not mentioned in text-books. Plus, the use of this material in the classroom might increase students' confidence, and stimulate them to develop the habit of making use of it at home for both entertainment and autonomous learning.

4.2 Recommendations for Practice

In this study, students mostly expressed their enthusiasm for integrating regular English classes with viewing sitcoms. However, to achieve meaningful results, such activities must be monitored and thoughtfully designed by teachers for a longer period of time. The present research only developed on data collected through individual surveys and one-hour class. Therefore, it could be interesting to explore the effects that sitcoms could have on students' English proficiency development over a longer period of time, with teachers regularly integrating sitcoms in their lessons in order to explain specific topics and achieve pre-established linguistic objectives. To do so, it might be interesting to employ videos as part of learning units, as this kind of educational design allows the analysis of topics by utilising different kinds of approaches that address various skills for more than one hour. In fact, taking into account the aforementioned positive outcomes, teachers could design learning units by taking advantage of sitcoms' variety to teach students about a wide range of themes. Baron and Celaya (2022: 251) suggest that in a natural and engaging approach, teachers can employ captioned audio-visual comedy content to assist students recognize the pragmatic formulas that are necessary in specific contexts and circumstances. By doing so, they motivate learners to continue

studying by viewing movies and TV shows in English, with or without captions, so that they can be exposed to L2 informal features as a leisure activity at home. In the same way, Coskun and Mutlu (2017) recommend that English professors assume responsibility for motivating learners to regularly participate in extramural English activities, considering their age, gender, and interests.

4.2.1 Sitcoms as Meaningful Material for Learning Units

A progressive learning unit with focus on entertainment could be used by teachers to provide sitcoms as instructive material to achieve pre-established learning objectives. Learning units are instructional paths that use a variety of learning resources to focus on one specific objective utilizing a transdisciplinary approach. More specifically, they can be defined as follows (Lockyer, Bennett, Agostinho, & Harper, 2008):

> "An abstract term used to refer to any delimited piece of education or training, such as a course, a module, a lesson, and so forth. It is noted that a "unit of learning" represents more than just a collection of ordered resources to learn; it includes a variety of prescribed activities (problem solving activities, search activities, discussion activities, peer assessment activities, etc.), assessments, services, and support facilities provided by teachers, trainers, and other staff members".

The learning unit should last between six and 10 hours or more, and it comprises different events, acts, expressions and linguistic structures related to the same situational context or cultural topic. The example given by Balboni suggests that if the topic is public transportation, then all the materials and activities chosen will all be related to travel, such as making a flight reservation, buying tickets at the train station, asking for information on subway routes, calling a taxi; and will cover related

communicative acts, specific lexical and grammatical elements, and reflection on the role that public transportation plays in a specific culture.

The unit should be introduced by a motivational phase that explains why the learning goals chosen are meaningful and stimulate students to begin studying. Showing a video, a brain-storming activity on the topic based on previous knowledge, listing a keyword list, or telling an anecdote about previous experiences can motivate students to learn about the topic. The motivation phase should be followed by a sequence of didactic materials paired with multiple activities that address different abilities and learning styles. Balboni (2012) supports the theory that when English learners approach any material (a text, a video, an audio track, etc.) they turn "perceptions" (3) into "acquisition" (*ibid.)* in three distinct phases: the first one is the global perception, the second is the analytical perception and the third is the conclusive perception that spontaneously transforms the elements received by our brain into acquired information. The global perception relies on the following strategies:

- redundancy and repetition of information;

- formulation of socio-pragmatic hypotheses aimed at speculating on what might happen in the context of the material that is being considered based on students' previous knowledge;

- formulation of linguistic hypotheses based on students' knowledge of grammar;

- development of metaphors;

- analysis of the material in order to confirm the hypotheses;

- finding analogies between the material used and current events, and previous experiences.

That is, the first approach to the material should be global, and can be done by reading, listening or viewing it several times. Each of these times has to be marked by an activity in order to foster students to put into practice a more analytical approach. The activities should focus on meaningful elements such as the followings:

- relevant acts of communication;

- linguistic features;

- cultural topics;

- non-verbal language.

The aim of the second phase of the learning unit is, therefore, marking the learning process with a sequence of meaningful material accompanied by various activities whose objective is to make the students retain information through redundancy, formulation, confirmation of hypotheses, and their application to real life situations.

Further, the achievement of the pre-established objectives is verified through a testing phase. The teacher develops exercises aimed at assessing each student and examining their development in relation to the general learning goals.

Finally, in order to give closure to the topic and remark once again the relevance of it, the teacher could prepare some supplementary activities to connect what has been learned with its real-life use. Some examples are writing a movie, book or video-game review and upload it on the internet for the public to read, exchanging letters with students from another country, or recording a video that demonstrates the linguistic achievements. Figure 22 summarizes the phases of the learning unit (Balboni, 2012: 4):
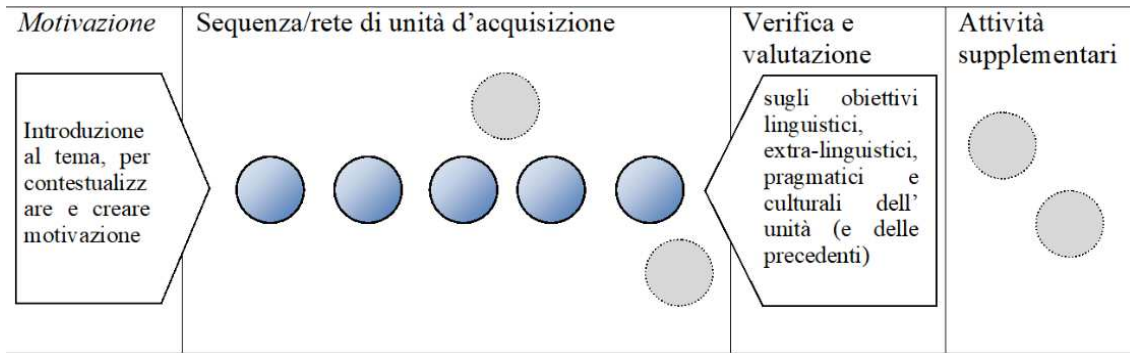
Figure 22 - Ideal structure of a learning unit

Teaching English through learning units can lead to better retention of information, because of its repetitive features. Additionally, the multidisciplinary approach is beneficial for different kinds of learning styles that can lead to better results in language performance, and therefore translate into a more motivated behavior on the students' part.

As this study has shown, linguistic acquisition can be eased by bringing usually out-of-class activities into the classroom as authentic material. The primary aim of English language teaching is to teach natural English, whatever the circumstance. So, the educational program for English courses for intermediate students should include learning units based on a sequence of activities that present a sufficient number of intralingual subtitled TV series clips supported by prior linguistic preparation. As Caimi (2006: 7) points out, within the learning unit, teachers could alternate language and vocabulary studies with screening time, during which students could practice both listening and reading abilities. When language study and entertainment are merged, learners are highly motivated and are more likely to enjoy the video without considering the work required to understand a foreign language.

Regarding teaching strategies aimed at lowering the students' affective filter and overcoming the challenging related to the learning process, Kavitha and Kalanidhi (2020: 94) comment that:

> "When applying these strategies, learners gain positive emotion in a safe and positive learning environment with their peers and teachers. Learning about students' backgrounds and building positive relationships in the classroom are the key factors to impact student behavior and academic achievement. It supports and promotes the learners to witness their feelings, motivation, and attitude related to second language learning. When the students get proper guidance and motivation towards learning the second language, they express a positive attitude towards knowing, practicing, and expressing effectively".

This is in line with the students' feedback on the in-class activities, indicating that amusing sitcoms in class might serve as an effective strategy for language acquisition that lowers learners' inhibitions and increases their confidence and positive attitude towards learning, which results in more motivation and willingness to continue studying.

4.2.2 Some Practical Examples

The previous section suggested that teacher's employment of sitcoms into the English lesson might bring greater greater results when incorporated as a meaningful material in the context of a learning unit. Pairing authenticity of language, comedy and familiarity with repetition and activities aimed at addressing various abilities, might be the best formula to teach informal language while promoting students' confidence and motivation. In their book *Using Authentic Video in the Language Classroom*, Sherman (2003) illustrates several practical ways to approach sitcoms' videos clips or entire episodes for English learning purposes.

Before beginning with the viewing, teachers should provide students with all the information they need to understand the scene or the episode. The following elements should be explained in detail (Sherman, 2003: 39):

- "describe the situation and present the characters and their personal quirks [...]. Get them to say the names out loud and test them on the roles and relationships.

- Explain any 'running gags' (=recurring jokes).

- Introduce key vocabulary and cultural references, especially what is necessary to understand the jokes.

- Prepare for the opening situation by doing the appropriate parts of Daily Life[17], picking up the point where the comedy departs from the norm".

Teacher instructions for activities to follow after the viewing of the scene and before the subsequent parts include (Sherman, 2003: 40):

- "Recap the action so far, [...] or to ask each other comprehension questions [...];

- Recycle vocabulary which will occur again. Write it up and get students to put it back into context, saying who used and what it is referred to;

- Give essential vocabulary for the forthcoming part and rehearse it in some way. Also explain any cultural differences and wordplay.

- (For more advanced students) Ask for action predictions [...] or prepare an obvious future scene;

- (For lower level students) Explain the forthcoming situations – also explain why they are funny! Leave only a fragment to the students' own understanding".

---

[17] Daily Life is a lower-intermediate exercise explained at page 151 of Sherman, J. (2003). *Using authentic video in the language classroom*. Cambridge Etc.: Cambridge University Press. Students list daily life activities and then focus on each one by viewing audio-visual scenes that depict it. More activites based on the watching of sitcoms and other inputs can be found in Sherman's book.

These instructions should be performed by making use of activities that give students the possibility to learn different aspects of English (vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics, etc.) and practice their language abilities (reading, writing, speaking and listening).

In what follows we report four exercises with different learning objectives presented in Sherman's manual, that might be applied to showing sitcoms during English class:

a. "Fly on the wall"

This exercise can be used to recap the actions seen during a specific scene.

"*Aim*: comprehension of the action; vocabulary of human behavior; written narrative.

Level: lower-intermediate

Material: sitcom

Procedure:

1. After viewing the film, students choose an important scene and (individually or in groups) try to reconstruct it from memory, as if they were an unseen witness or 'fly on the wall': who is there? What do they say? What happens?
2. Without re-viewing, students write up their account – double-spaced – than view the scene to check their recall and amend their account (or each others'). They should write the changes in the spaces between the lines, or use the 'revision' function on the computer".

b. "Lipreading and mindreading".

This exercise can be used when looking closely at one specific interaction between characters in a scene.

"*Aim*: producing interactive language.

Level: lower-intermediate.

Material: short clips or scenes with vivid non-verbal expression.

Procedure:

1. Play the sequence without sound and discuss what the characters are feeling and saying.

2. Students count the utterances in the sequence and construct a dialogue. Replay the soundless scene as often as necessary and help by providing the first utterances, several key utterances or one complete side of the conversation; or (if possible) by slowing down the film to focus on the actors' mouths.

3. Students act along with the actors before viewing with sound".

c. "News Story"

This exercise can be completed after viewing a sticoms scene that presents a specific and interesting event.

"*Aim*: turning video input into a newspaper sory: comprehension, discussion and writing.

Level: intermediate

Procedure: Start by looking at the format of a few short newspaper stories (headline, by-line, picture, lenght of paragraphs) and the story structure (non-chronological order, summary of first paragraph, expansion in the following two or three paragraphs, direct quotations from interested parties and how these are introduced, less essential details at the end which enable the article to be cut from the bottom up).

1. Do comprehension work on the video input.

2. Discuss what the story is, i.e. what will go in the first paragraph [...].

3. Decide what extra information will be needed and who will be asked for comments.

4. (Optional) Students invent other interviewees, role play phone calls and pull out good quotations.

5. Discuss what the newspaper headline might be, what visual information must be converted to words, and what picture might accompany the story.

6. Students write first drafts, swap them for editing and rewriting, and finally write up the story as far as possible like a real newspaper, with column, headlines, etc.".

The present study had to rely on quantitative data collected by asking students to complete close-ended exercises such as gap-fill and matching sentences. Only one hour has been dedicated to such activities, which only covered listening comprehension, and vocabulary's development. Yet, there are many more ways in which teachers could effectively integrate sitcoms into the language classroom. This section has shown how watching this kind of audio-visual material in the context of a learning unit has a

positive impact on students' linguistic development and attitudes, and provided some practical examples on how to improve various language skills based on viewing sitcoms. Such improvements might be interesting to further investigate.

4.3 Suggestions for Further Research

As for future research, there are several factors regarding participants, learning goals, and teaching methods that may need further investigation. A study similar to the present one could be carried out on a larger group of students, including more diverse and creative classroom activities aimed at addressing the development of singular skills, for example spoken interaction, reading comprehension, and writing skills. The present study could only target listening skills and vocabulary, so additional research might cover the influence of watching TV series in class in improving the other aforementioned abilities. In addition, more attention should be paid to the inclusiveness of students with learning disabilities, who are increasingly common in today's classrooms, thanks to the development of diagnostic techniques. In this case, the questionnaire and especially the in-class activities should be changed and adapted according to different educational objectives.

Also, it could be interesting to explore the differences in proficiency development by comparing results obtained from viewing TV series with English captions to those from watching the same audio-visual material with Italian subtitles. The study could involve two groups of students, one for either one of the viewing modes, and they should complete the same set of activities aimed at collecting comparable data.

New studies might involve teachers more, and, together with the studies' authors, develop a learning unit that integrates sitcoms as part of the English lesson for a longer period, as presented in the section about the "recommendations for practice". In this way, the exercises could target all the language abilities and register precise results regarding their improvement, but also collect more truthful data on students' motivation and confidence. During a longer testing time, authors could adopt a qualitative method combined with a more quantitative method, such as that used for the present research. They could thus focus more on student opinions and state of mind regarding the integration of TV series in the didactic of English in school.

Another factor that could be explored is the teaching of English with other genres of TV series, to be decided based on a further investigation of student interests, culture, age and lower or higher English proficiency. Language teaching with TV series should not only be an end, but could be used in other subjects. Indeed, different genres could be functional to teaching science, history or literature. For example, pairing English with science-themed series such as *Breaking Bad* or *Big Bang Theory* might be helpful and appreciated by students who are also attending classes in chemistry and physics.

4.4 Final Thoughts

The study has revealed some interesting student opinions about watching TV series in the classroom. Some participants pointed out in the feedback that they would like to continue watching this type of content in the classroom to avoid studying, and it was also expressed that doing this kind of activity at home instead of doing homework would be better. It is necessary to specify two main things. The first is that the use of

these materials should in no way replace the study of the language based on textbooks, school resources and guidelines determined by the Ministry of Education and already tested by teachers. Watching TV series in the classroom might only be one way of integrating traditional English classes by offering teachers and students a complementary activity to textbooks which, however, does not aim to be a substitute for them.

In addition, audio-visual materials used for language learning are very often misinterpreted, as it tends to be easier and more fun for students to learn. This material in the context of the classroom should by no means be seen as a having break from studying or a waste of time. By contrast, it must be interpreted as a useful additional tool that the new media affordances offer us for the acquisition of English. This kind of misinterpretation can be caused by the widespread idea that studying must be strenuous, and that in order to learn it is necessary to make significant efforts. That is why the objective of this study was also to demonstrate that didactic objectives can also be achieved in a lighter and less stressful way, as a complementary activity to traditional learning.

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Appendix 1 - Questionnaire on Extramural English

(Movies and TV series)

Link: https://forms.gle/SCHfrjJo5ZAE71Kz6

The questionnaire has been designed in order to collect data about students' habits regarding their ways of accessing English outside of school (extramural input). It is divided as follows:

A. Personal information
B. Questions on the frequency and reasons for watching content in English or dubbed in Italian.
   a. Movies
   b. TV series
C. Questions on viewing movies and TV series with subtitles, either in English, Italian or other languages.
D. Questions on viewing devices.
E. Question on favorite genres and other types of English content.
F. Questions on the development of language competence.

Dear participant,

under the supervision of professor Erik Castello of the University of Padua I designed the present anonymous questionnaire, which aims at collecting data on school students' ways of accessing the English language at home. I would like to invite you to participate in the study to explore how you watch movies and TV series in English. The questionnaire should take no more than 10-15 minutes of your time, I thank you for your collaboration. Results will be part of my Master's thesis on the benefits of integrating TV series in the English class, and will be analysed with all criteria guaranteeing maximum confidentiality and used only for the purpose of this research.

If you have any question, please contact me at: federica.pes.2@studenti.unipd.it

Thank you,
Federica Pes

A. Personal Information

1. Gender:
☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Prefer not to say

2. Age:
☐ 14-15
☐ 16-17
☐ 18-19

3. School:
☐ Liceo
☐ Tecnico
☐ Professionale
☐ Other

4. School year:
☐ First year
☐ Second year
☐ Third year
☐ Fourth year
☐ Fifth year

5. Which of the following is your native language?
☐ Italian
☐ English
☐ French
☐ Spanish
☐ German
☐ Portuguese
☐ Russian
☐ Romanian
☐ Arabic
☐ Chinese
☐ Japanese
☐ Scandinavian languages (Norwegian, Danish, Finnish, Swedish)
☐ African languages
☐ Other asian languages

6. How many other languages do you know apart from your native language (at least on a basic level)?
☐ 1
☐ 2

☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ More

7. How old were you when you first started learning English?

    _____

8. Do you think that your English level is:
☐ Basic
☐ Intermediate
☐ Advanced
☐ Native

9. Have you ever spent a period of time in an English-speaking country?
☐ Yes
☐ No

10. If you answered "Yes" to the previous question, how much time did you spend living in an English-speaking country?
☐ 1-3 weeks
☐ 1-3 months
☐ 9-12 months
☐ More

11. Do you prefer to watch:
☐ Movies
☐ TV series
☐ both

B. Questions on the frequency of watching content in English
   a. Movies

12. How often do you watch movies in English?
☐ Very often (everyday)
☐ Often (once or twice a week)
☐ Sometimes (once every two weeks)
☐ Rarely (once every month or less)

13. How often do you watch TV series in English?
☐ Very often (everyday)

☐ Often (once or twice a week)
☐ Sometimes (once every two weeks)
☐ Rarely (once every month or less)

14. How much time do you spend watching TV series every time you do?
☐ More than two hours
☐ From one to two hours
☐ One hour
☐ From half an hour to one hour
☐ Less than half an hour

15. Why do you like watching American/British movies (you can choose more than one option)?
☐ For the quality of the scenes.
☐ For the special effects.
☐ To learn English
☐ Because you relate to the characters.
☐ Because movies have a beginning and an end.
☐ Because you watch them with your friends and family.
☐ Because you like to hear the dialogues.
☐ To better understand British or American culture.
☐ Other….

16. How do you like watching British or American movies?
☐ Dubbed in Italian
☐ In the original language
☐ Both

17. If you watch movies dubbed in Italian, you do it because (you can choose more than one option):
☐ You watch them together with other people who do not speak English
☐ You think the Italian dubbing is usually good quality.
☐ It is hard for you to understand everything if the dialogues are in their original language.

18. If you watch movies in English (with or without subtitles), you do it because (you can choose more than one option):
☐ You like to listen to the actors' original voices.
☐ Original dialogues are more natural.
☐ You want to learn the language.

☐ You want to understand all the aspects of the language, expressions, humour, etc.

b. TV series

19. Why do you like to watch British/American TV series (you can choose more than one option)?
☐ Because the episodes are short.
☐ Because you get attached to the characters
☐ Because you like to listen to the dialogues.
☐ Because you discuss them with other people (e.g. friends, family, social network, forums).
☐ Because you like the aesthetic quality of the scenes.
☐ To learn English.
☐ Because you relate to the characters.
☐ Because the language is easier to understand than in movies.
☐ Other…

20. How do you prefer to watch TV series?
☐ Dubbed in Italian
☐ In original language
☐ Both

21. If you watch TV series dubbed in Italian, you do it because (you can choose more than one option):
☐ You watch them together with people who do not speak English.
☐ The TV series you want to watch is not available in the original language.
☐ You think that Italian dubbing is usually good quality.
☐ It is hard for you to understand everything if the dialogues are in original language.

22. If you prefer to watch TV series in English, you do it because (you can choose more than one option):
☐ You like to listen to the actors' actual voices.
☐ Original dialogues are more natural.
☐ You want to learn the language.
☐ You want to understand all the aspects of the language, including typical expressions, humour, etc.
☐ You think that the Italian dubbing is usually bad.

C. Questions on viewing movies and TV series with subtitles, either in English, Italian or other languages.

23. If you watch movies in English, how do you watch them?
    ☐ With subtitles
    ☐ Without subtitles

24. If you watch movies in English with subtitles, which kind of subtitles do you prefer?
    ☐ Subtitles in English
    ☐ Subtitles in Italian
    ☐ Other…

25. If you watch TV series in English, how do you watch them?
    ☐ With subtitles
    ☐ Without subtitles

26. If you watch TV series in English with subtitles, which kind of subtitles do you prefer?
    ☐ Subtitles in English
    ☐ Subtitles in Italian
    ☐ Other…

27. If you watch movies/TV series subtitled in English, you do it because (you can choose more than one option):
    ☐ They help you understand the original dialogues
    ☐ They help you remember the spelling of words.
    ☐ You want to see the transcription of what you hear.
    ☐ You think you can learn more if you listen to the original dialogues with the English subtitles.
    ☐ You want to learn English
    ☐ Subtitles are usually available earlier.
    ☐ You do not like the quality of the Italian subtitles.
    ☐ Other…

28. If you want movies/TV series in English subtitles in Italian, you do it because (you can choose more than one option):
    ☐ They help you understand the original dialogues.
    ☐ You are interested in the translation of lines from English to Italian
    ☐ Because the version with Italian is usually available earlier.

☐ Because you read faster in Italian than in English.

29. If you watch movies/TV series in English without subtitles, you do it because (you can choose more than one option):

☐ Subtitles are too long and fast.

☐ Subtitles distract you from the movies/episodes.

☐ Subtitles often do not match the dialogue you hear.

☐ Other…

D. Questions on viewing modes.

30. You prefer to watch movies:

☐ At the cinema.

☐ On TV.

☐ Online with the computer

☐ Other…

31. Why do you prefer watching them using the medium you chose?

_____

32. You prefer to watch TV series:

☐ On TV.

☐ Online with the computer.

☐ Other…

33. Why do you prefer watching them using the medium you chose?

_____

E. Questions on favorite genres and other types of English content.

34. If you watch British or American movies, which genres do you prefer (you can choose more than one option)?

☐ Comedy

☐ Animation

☐ Adventure

☐ Action

☐ Sci-fi

☐ Drama

☐ Horror

☐ Crime

☐ Romance

☐ Thriller

☐ Other…

35. Do you watch British or American TV series? Write down your favorite ones:

    _____

36. Apart from TV series and movies, which other content do you like to watch (you can choose more than one option)?

☐ Sport

☐ Talk-shows

☐ Concerts

☐ Variety shows

☐ Documentaries

☐ Cooking shows

☐ News

☐ YouTube videos

☐ Other…

F. Questions on the development of language competence.

37. Do you think that your English competence has improved by watching movies or TV series, either dubbed or subtitled?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Maybe

38. If the answer to the previous question is "Yes", which competence has improved the most?

☐ Listening comprehension

☐ Vocabulary

☐ Grammar

☐ Reading comprehension

☐ Spoken production and interaction

☐ Other…

Appendix 2 - Class Activities

Link: https://forms.gle/ehgfqRu3uZdFx3YW9

Dear participant,

welcome! Under the supervision of professor Erik Castello of the University of Padua I designed the present anonymous activities, which aim at collecting data on school students' ability to learn a second language with the use of TV series. I would like to invite you to participate in the study to explore the effectiveness of American sitcoms when learning English. In particular, you will be watching selected scenes from "The Office" and complete gap-fill, multiple choice and matching exercises, which should take no more than 30/40 minutes of your time. I thank you for your collaboration. Results will be part of my Master's thesis on the benefits of integrating TV series in the English class, and will be analysed with all criteria guaranteeing maximum confidentiality and used only for the purpose of this research.

IMPORTANT NOTE: if subtitles are activated on YouTube videos, PLEASE turn them off. You will not receive any mark for this test and I could end up with false results. So, please try to complete the exercises just by listening to the scenes and reading the scripts. Thank you again.

If you have any question, please contact me at: federica.pes.2@studenti.unipd.it

Thank you,
Federica Pes

The lesson plan is divided as follows:
    A. Personal information
    B. Exercises
        a. Warm-up: Parkour
        b. "First Aid Fail"
            i. Excerpt 1
            ii. Excerpt 2
            iii. Excerpt 3
        c. "Michael's Injury"
        d. "Dwight owns a Bed and Breakfast"
    C. Feedback

A. Personal Information
    1. Which school year are you in?

☐ First
☐ Second
☐ Third
☐ Fourth
☐ Fifth

2. How would you define your English level?
☐ Beginner
☐ Beginner/Intermediate
☐ Intermediate/Advanced
☐ Advanced

B. Exercises

a. **Warm-up - "Parkour"** (5-7 min.)
Material: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Kvw2BPKjz0&t=1s
Students watch the short clip of "Parkour", and are asked the following questions. They are not required to write down the answers as it is a brainstorming activity to warm up.

- Do you know where this scene is from?
- Have you ever thought that the language of movies can help you learn English?
- Would you find it useful and/or entertaining to watch TV series in class in order to learn English?

b. **"First Aid Fail"** (10-15 min.)

Material: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vmb1tqYqyII&t=1s
The first exercise is a Gap-fill activity. Students are provided with three excerpts from the script of the scene "First Aid Fail" and are required to fill in the gaps with the given words while watching the clip. Then, if necessary, they can listen to it a second time to check their answers. The words to complete are interjections and meaningful vocabulary.

Scripts (the highlighted words represent the gaps):

i. Excerpt 1:
Michael: Where are they? You know what? If we come across somebody with no arms or legs do we bother resuscitating them? I mean, what kind of quality of life do we have there?
Kevin: I would want to live with no legs.

Michael: How about no arms? No arms or legs is basically how you exist right now, Kevin. You don't do anything.

Rose: All right, well, let's get back to it. 'Cause you're losing him. Okay, too fast. Everyone, we need to pump at a pace of 100 beats per minute .

Michael: okay, that's uh, hard to keep track. How many is that per hour?

Jim: How's that gonna help you?

Michael: I will divide and then count to it.

Jim: Right.

Rose: Okay. Well, a good trick is to pump to the tune of 'Staying Alive' by the Bee Gees. Do you know that song?

ii. Excerpt 2:

Dwight: Okay, he's dead. Anyone know what we do next? Anybody? Rose?

Rose: I have no idea.

Dwight: Anyone else?

Phyllis: We bury him?

Dwight: Wrong. Ehh. Check for an organ donor card. If he has one, we only have minutes to harvest.

Creed: He has no wallet, I checked.

Michael: He is an organ donor.

Dwight: He is.

Michael: Yeah.

Dwight: Get me some ice and a styrofoam bucket. Here we go.

Angela: Oh my God! Dwight!

Kelly: Dwight!

Angela: What are you-- What are you doing?

Dwight: We search for the organs. Where's the heart? The precious heart.

Stanley: I'm not feeling well. I need to sit down.

Michael: Hey, Stanley.

Andy: Stanley.

Michael: Are you okay?

Angela: Oh my God!

Stanley: Oh my God!

Angela: Dwight!

Dwight: Clarice?

Stanley: Oh my God!

iii. Excerpt 3:

David Wallace: Could you tell me why you had to cut the face off the dummy?

Dwight: I didn't think it was very realistic in the movie and it turns out, it's pretty realistic.

David Wallace: We had to pay for it. Cost us thirty five hundred dollars.

Michael: Five thousand three hundred dollars for a dummy?

Dwight: ==Wow==.

Michael: Okay, ==look==. David, this is why we have training. We start with the dummy, and we learn from our mistakes. And now Dwight knows not to cut the face off of a real person.

   c. **"Michael's injury"** (10-15 min.)

Material: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_HR_o0jDqw

The second exercise is a multiple choice activity. Students are required to choose the best words in order to complete the excerpts of dialogue without watching the scene. Then, they watch the clip to check their answers. Words include interjections seen in the previous exercise and interesting phrasal verbs.

Script (the highlighted words represent the gaps):

1. Pam: Michael, ==do you need me to== call an ambulance?

   Michael: No, I want you to pick me up.

2. Jim: What is going on?

   Michael: I want to come to work. But I need you to come and ==pick me up==.

3. I ==enjoy== having breakfast in bed. I like waking up to the smell of bacon, sue me. And since I don't have a butler, I have to do it myself. So, most nights before I go to bed, I will lay six strips of bacon out on my George Foreman Grill. Then I go to sleep. When I wake up, I plug in the grill, I go back to sleep again. Then I wake up to the ==smell== of crackling bacon. It is delicious, it's good for me. It's the perfect way to start the day. Today I got up, I stepped onto the grill and it ==clamped== down on my foot... that's it. I don't see what's so hard to believe about that.

4. Dwight: What is going on? What is going on?

   Pam: Michael, is, um, sick and he wants one of us to ==rescue== him.

   Michael: I'm not ==sick==! I'm burned!

5. Dwight: ==Hold on== Michael! I am coming! Wait there!

   Michael: I don't want Dwight!

6. Pam: Michael, why don't you call your girlfriend?

   Michael: I don't have a girlfriend.

   Jim: But you said that you ==went out== with her this weekend.

   Michael: It was all ==made up==. Just someone come, ok? Anyone. Anyone but Dwight.

d. **"Dwight owns a Bed and Breakfast"** (10-15 min.)

Material: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ugh6ctH2SE&t=10s

The third exercise is a matching activity. Students watch the scene. Later, they are required to match the sentences in order to complete the dialogue about booking a stay in a Bed and Breakfast. Only one side of the conversation is hearable in the scene, so they need to imagine what would fit best as answers.

Script:

Dwight:

- Dunder Mifflin, Dwight Schrute. Please hold.
- Schrute Farms, guten tag. How can I help you?
- Yes, we have availability on those nights. How many in your party?
- Oh no, I'm sorry, no king beds.
- No queen either. Well, we make our own mattresses that don't conform to the traditional sizes. Closest would be twin.
- Thank you so much for calling. Call back again. Aufedersein!

To pair with (non-hearable):

- Good morning, is this Schrute Farm's number?
- I am calling to book a stay at the Bed and Breakfast. Do you have any available rooms on the last weekend of May?
- Two, do you have any double rooms? With a king bed?
- So, maybe queen size then?
- Well, no thank you. We changed our minds.
- All right. Goodbye.

C. Feedback

3. Did you like the scenes from the TV show "The Office"?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Maybe

4. Did you find the activities too difficult for your current English level?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Maybe

5. Did you find the activities too easy for your current English level?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No

☐ Maybe

6. Were they useful for learning new words of natural speech?
    ☐ Yes
    ☐ No
    ☐ Maybe

7. How many English expressions seen did you already know and use?
    ☐ None
    ☐ Some of them
    ☐ About half of them
    ☐ Several
    ☐ All of them

8. Would you enjoy doing this kind of activity in class?
    ☐ Yes
    ☐ No
    ☐ Maybe

9. Do you think that doing them during the class would create a more relaxed learning environment? (rather than, for example, just doing the activities in the textbook?)
    ☐ Yes
    ☐ No
    ☐ Maybe

10. Which other TV series or movies would you like to use to learn English during the lesson?

Federica Pes, Università degli Studi di Padova

Riassunto

Lo sviluppo delle tecnologie digitali ed il loro utilizzo in età sempre più giovane ha influenzato le abitudini degli studenti e ha reso comune la ricezione di input in inglese come seconda lingua (L2) nella loro vita quotidiana. Infatti, l'aumento dell'uso dei social media e di internet in generale ha favorito una maggiore accessibilità ai contenuti in lingua inglese, definita dagli studi come "inglese extramurale" (EE), la quale include tutti i contenuti L2 che gli studenti consumano fuori da scuola, dai film ai videogiochi, dai video di YouTube ai podcast. In particolare, vari studi hanno dimostrato che i materiali audiovisivi rappresentano un input linguistico più autentico rispetto ai libri di testo scolastici, che spesso potrebbero apparire noiosi e distaccati dalla realtà agli studenti abituati ad un mondo pervaso dalla tecnologia. Ciò è stato confermato con lo studio della linguistica dei corpora. Infatti, vari studiosi hanno analizzato il linguaggio delle serie televisive britanniche e americane, confrontandolo con la fraseologia che appare nei rispettivi corpora, ovvero il British National Corpus (BNC) e il Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

Da un punto di vista pedagogico, è stata studiata l'esposizione extramurale degli studenti (EE) all'inglese come L2, utilizzando sondaggi sulle loro abitudini con successive sessioni di test, che hanno rivelato favorire uno sviluppo generale della conoscenza del vocabolario, dell'ascolto e delle abilità orali. Molti studi si sono concentrati sulla veridicità del linguaggio dei film e serie tv e hanno dimostrato la sua autenticità nonostante fosse precedentemente sceneggiato, e quindi forse troppo artificiale per essere usato per imparare l'inglese come L2. In altre parole, grazie alla spontaneità e alla varietà di dialoghi e contesti situazionali ritratti nei film americani e britannici, è probabile che gli studenti sviluppino le loro capacità di interazione ed

imparino a comunicare in modo naturale e fluente con i madrelingua facendo uso di un linguaggio informale ed autentico. Vari studiosi hanno preso in considerazione la linguistica dei corpora per condurre analisi basate sulle sceneggiature per confermare tale affermazione ed hanno dimostrato che, al momento di presentare contenuti in inglese durante le lezioni, il materiale audiovisivo potrebbe essere la migliore alternativa all'apprendimento astratto e irrealistico dei libri di testo.

La ricerca ha dimostrato che i materiali audiovisivi come film e serie TV sono affidabili per l'insegnamento dei diversi aspetti dell' inglese come lingua straniera (EFL), grazie alla loro vicinanza al linguaggio spontaneo. Abbinati alla memorizzazione del vocabolario inglese e alla pratica grammaticale, potrebbero rendere la lezione di inglese un'esperienza di apprendimento più stimolante ed inerente ad un linguaggio più fedele alla vita reale, una dimensione spesso mancante nelle lezioni basate esclusivamente sui libri di testo. L'utilità di questo tipo di contenuti può essere potenziata con l'abbinamento di informazioni testuali (sottotitoli) agli input audiovisivi. Secondo Champoux (1999), Sherman (2003), Birch & Gardiner (2005), Sydorenko (2010), Mayer (2014), Sariçoban & Yürük (2016) e Vijayakumar, Baisel, Subha & Abirami (2020) l'elemento visivo è di aiuto agli studenti: facilita la comprensione di temi e idee astratte, dato che li abbina a informazioni verbali in input audiovisivi e quindi può essere di grande beneficio per l'apprendimento L2.

In più, la versatilità delle serie TV consente di incorporarle in diverse tipologie di lezioni, offrendo un'ampia varietà di temi e situazioni per soddisfare i diversi stili e modalità di apprendimento.

Nello specifico, tali materiali possono sviluppare le competenze linguistiche degli studenti quali: comprensione del testo (Sariçoban & Yürük, 2016), comprensione

pragmatica (Washburn, 2001; Barón & Celaya, 2022), grammatica (Lee & Revesz, 2018; Muñoz, Pujadas e Pattemore, 2021; Saeedi & Biri, 2016), vocabolario (Muñoz, Pujadas & Pattemore, 2021), e pronuncia (Wisniewska & Mora, 2020). Un altro importante fattore di apprendimento menzionato dai critici è la motivazione degli studenti. A questo proposito, Kabooha (2016) spiega come l'uso dei film durante la lezione di inglese possa sviluppare le competenze linguistiche degli studenti stimolando interesse e desiderio di proseguire a guardare contenuti simili.

Tra tutti i generi televisivi, i critici considerano le sitcom il modello più appropriato di linguaggio autentico. Il termine "sitcom" è stato introdotto nella lingua americana negli anni '50 quando le commedie situazionali trasmesse in televisione hanno iniziato a sostituire gli spettacoli di varietà radiofonici, che erano stati il genere più popolare dall'inizio del secolo. Fino ad oggi, le sitcom sono state riflesso della società, dei suoi cambiamenti, delle sue necessità ed ideologie. Dipendendo dalle varie situazioni politiche e sociali, anche le sitcom cambiano, in modo che il pubblico possa vedere i loro bisogni sempre rappresentati, possa sentirsi ritratto o rassicurato, e quindi rimanere interessato. In più, una caratteristica fondamentale delle sitcom è la componente comica, la capacità di far ridere il pubblico, la quale varia a seconda del contesto in cui si svolge l'azione. Il genere delle sitcom non è quindi solo un accattivante modello di stile di vita umoristico, ma è anche un genere che si pone come specchio della società, riflettendo la sua "ibridazione culturale" e "mescolanza culturale". Relativamente all'insegnamento della lingua inglese, le sitcom sembrano essere i materiali audiovisivi più ideali per l'apprendimento, perché presentano al loro pubblico un modello di linguaggio più autentico e realistico. Secondo Washburn (2001), le sitcom presentano personaggi con background sociali, status e livelli di familiarità

diversi che agiscono in una molteplicità di situazioni comuni che riflettono la vita quotidiana. In questo modo, grazie ai dialoghi presentati, gli studenti sono esposti a un gran numero di variazioni linguistiche, senza però perdere la correttezza grammaticale e l'efficacia della comunicazione.

Il compito dell'insegnante è quello di scegliere le modalità con cui sfruttare le sitcom durante la lezione, ovvero selezionare l'episodio o la scena appropriata e pianificare le attività che gli studenti devono completare prima, durante e dopo la visione. La selezione del materiale audiovisivo non deve essere casuale, ma appropriata al contesto scolastico, all'età e alla competenza linguistica degli studenti.

La serie tv *The Office* è stata scelta per condurre il presente studio in virtù della sua crescente popolarità tra gli adolescenti, della sua somiglianza con la vita reale e della sua tendenza ad attirare il pubblico a guardarla più volte. Queste caratteristiche rendono *The Office* il materiale audiovisivo ideale da presentare agli studenti delle scuole secondarie, perché potrebbero identificarsi con i diversi personaggi ed esso potrebbe fornire loro un autentico spaccato di vita di un ambiente ordinario americano, il quale include anche un linguaggio informale e colloquiale.

Il secondo capitolo della tesi descrive i materiali ed i criteri utilizzati per la progettazione delle due fasi dell'indagine. Nella prima fase si è progettato un questionario con l'obiettivo di raccogliere dati sulle modalità di accesso degli studenti alla lingua inglese a casa, per analizzare le loro preferenze riguardo a film o serie TV, frequenza e modalità di visione.

Il sondaggio ha tentato di rispondere alle seguenti domande di ricerca:

- RQ1: Qual è l'entità dell'esposizione extramurale all'inglese tra gli studenti delle scuole secondarie italiane?

  ○ RQ1.1: Che tipo di input informale in inglese preferiscono e qual è la loro frequenza di visualizzazione?

● RQ2: Quali sono le ragioni per consumare tali contenuti e quali sono le preferenze di visualizzazione per quanto riguarda genere, sottotitoli e doppiaggio?

● RQ3: Quali sono i vantaggi di guardare tali contenuti secondo gli studenti?

Il questionario ha avuto il proposito di raccogliere dati quantitativi su quanti studenti sono esposti all'inglese estramurale a casa, e per quanto tempo, consentendo la creazione di un profilo chiaro dei partecipanti a questo caso di studio. Poiché l'autore non poteva essere fisicamente presente per somministrare il questionario, è stato registrato e mostrato ai partecipanti un video introduttivo che spiegava lo scopo della ricerca. Al gruppo campione è stato chiesto di compilare il questionario online sotto la supervisione dell'insegnante di inglese, in classe con il proprio telefono cellulare o a casa, poiché è stato anche caricato sul Moodle online della classe. Per procedere con l'analisi, i dati raccolti sono stati riassunti attraverso grafici a barre e grafici a torta, e successivamente esportati in un file Excel. Le limitazioni incontrate includono problemi riguardanti la veridicità delle risposte degli studenti. Secondo studi precedenti, in molti casi, gli studenti potrebbero dare risposte false quando esposti a tali questionari (Pavesi & Ghia, 2020: 66), poiché le loro risposte potrebbero essere influenzate dalla pressione del tempo, o perché desiderosi di fornire le informazioni che il ricercatore si aspetta di ricevere, anche inconsciamente. Inoltre, potrebbero sopravvalutare le loro competenze linguistiche.

La seconda fase della ricerca include attività pratiche mirate a dimostrare che combinare la visione di sitcom con l'insegnamento basato su libri di testo può portare a risultati vantaggiosi per quanto riguarda il miglioramento delle capacità di ascolto, di apprendimento del vocabolario e le routine pragmatiche. Le attività in classe hanno avuto lo scopo di confermare che gli studenti che hanno già familiarità con la fraseologia delle serie TV possono facilmente identificare le caratteristiche linguistiche informali, tipiche delle conversazioni quotidiane, e completare facilmente gli esercizi. Ciò sosterrebbe il fatto che includere le sitcom come parte della lezione di inglese potrebbe essere vantaggioso per ogni studente, specialmente per coloro che non le guardano nel loro tempo libero al di fuori della scuola, perché offrirebbe loro l'opportunità di creare un'abitudine utile. La seconda fase dello studio mira a rispondere alle seguenti domande di ricerca:

- RQ1: Quanta lingua televisiva già conoscono gli studenti e quanto è correlata al loro livello di conoscenza dell'inglese?
- RQ2: È davvero utile mostrare serie TV agli studenti durante le lezioni di inglese? In senso più ampio, è efficace l'esposizione al linguaggio informale all'interno del contesto scolastico per fornire agli studenti una conoscenza dell'inglese a tutto tondo?

Per selezionare elementi rilevanti dell'inglese quotidiano e informale da insegnare agli studenti, sono stati presi in considerazione come corpus i copioni di tutte le nove stagioni dello show televisivo *The Office*, e sono stati analizzati con l'utilizzo del software AntConc. Successivamente, le attività basate sugli elementi linguistici selezionati sono state sviluppate dopo averle discusse con l'insegnante di inglese degli

studenti. Infine, le attività sono state svolte in aula durante una lezione di inglese della durata di un'ora sotto la supervisione dell'insegnante, in una classe quarta presso il Liceo Michelangelo Grigoletti di Pordenone. Tra i limiti di questa parte dello studio c'è stato, in alcuni momenti, l'eccessivo entusiasmo e iperattività da parte dei partecipanti, che ha portato l'insegnante ad intervenire e quindi alterare il corso della lezione. Questo tipo di attività rischia di essere interpretato erroneamente dagli studenti poiché intesa come una sorta di pausa dallo studio, e, di conseguenza, non essere presa abbastanza sul serio. Tuttavia, è stata proprio questa atmosfera più rilassata creatasi durante la ricerca che ha permesso di produrre risultati positivi e di fare luce su alcuni spunti interessanti riguardo ad essi.

Il terzo capitolo illustra i risultati ottenuti. La ricerca ha rivelato che la maggior parte degli intervistati parla una o più lingue straniere oltre alla propria lingua madre. Uno di questi è l'inglese, che gli studenti hanno iniziato ad imparare all'età di sei anni. Quindi, al momento della ricerca si sono descritti come a un livello intermedio di inglese, tra il B1 ed il B2. Inoltre, circa un terzo di loro aveva trascorso un periodo da una a tre settimane in un paese di lingua inglese.

I risultati hanno suggerito che i partecipanti guardassero sia le serie TV che i film in inglese nel loro tempo libero da una volta al mese a una o due volte alla settimana, ogni volta per una o due ore consecutive. Gli studenti guardano film e serie TV in inglese per vari motivi. Sembrano apprezzare la qualità delle scene e dei dialoghi in lingua originale per via delle voci reali degli attori e della loro naturalezza. Se li guardano in italiano è perché vogliono capire meglio i dialoghi, oppure perché li stanno guardando insieme a persone che non parlano inglese. Per quanto riguarda i sottotitoli, generalmente prediligono l'inglese piuttosto che l'italiano, in modo da poter ampliare la

loro conoscenza della lingua e capire meglio ciò che sentono nelle scene. Gli studenti hanno affermato che a volte usano i sottotitoli in inglese per comprendere meglio i dialoghi e cogliere tutte le sfumature linguistiche, in particolare umorismo ed espressioni non facilmente traducibili. Poi, la maggior parte degli studenti intervistati guarda film e serie TV a casa sui computer da soli, utilizzando i popolari servizi di streaming on-demand. Hanno espresso infatti la necessità di sentirsi a proprio agio e senza interruzioni esterne. I film d'avventura e le commedie si sono rivelati tra i loro generi preferiti, mentre i drammi per adolescenti e le sitcom americane tra i generi più citati di serie TV. Un'altra popolare forma di contenuto in inglese che gli studenti guardano nel tempo libero sono i video di YouTube. Gli studenti credono che guardare materiale audiovisivo in inglese possa migliorare la loro comprensione orale, il vocabolario, la produzione orale e il desiderio di interagire nella L2.

L'obiettivo della seconda parte dello studio è stato quello di testare la competenza degli studenti che hanno già esperienza nella visione di film e serie TV americane e britanniche in lingua originale. Inoltre, l'obiettivo era quello di testare l'introduzione delle sitcom nella lezione di inglese, come risorsa utile sia per gli insegnanti che per gli studenti. I risultati ottenuti dalle attività presentate in aula dovrebbero confermare l'ipotesi che l'esposizione prolungata al linguaggio televisivo possa avere benefici sullo sviluppo della conoscenza dell'inglese sotto diversi punti di vista: grammatica, lessico (fraseologia compresa), pragmatica e capacità di ascolto.

Durante la lezione pratica, le opinioni dei partecipanti hanno evidenziato che guardare le serie TV potrebbe essere il modo migliore per imparare passivamente la lingua divertendosi. In media, il risultato degli esercizi è stato positivo, con circa due terzi dei partecipanti che hanno fornito tutte le risposte corrette nelle attività di

riempimento, comprensione orale e abbinamento delle frasi. La stessa quantità di studenti ha trovato le scene e gli esercizi piacevoli e non troppo difficili. In effetti, la maggioranza conosceva già diversi termini, o alcuni di essi, ma trovava comunque le attività utili per imparare nuove parole. Inoltre, la maggior parte dei partecipanti ha affermato che il completamento delle attività basate su *The Office* creasse un ambiente di apprendimento piacevole e rilassato e che probabilmente si sarebbero sentiti incoraggiati a guardare le sitcom in inglese a casa grazie alla loro visione in classe.

Il quarto capitolo infine fornisce conclusioni basate sui risultati della ricerca da dati qualitativi raccolti sull'apprendimento dell'inglese come L2 con le sitcom, nonché discussioni e raccomandazioni per ricerche future. Questo studio in due fasi ha confermato l'ipotesi principale che la visione prolungata di film e serie TV in inglese possa aiutare gli studenti a imparare l'inglese autentico, fornendo utili esempi di linguaggio informale, spesso trascurato dai libri di testo, ma utilizzato quotidianamente dai madrelingua. Inoltre, la ricerca ha riscontrato effetti positivi nell'integrazione della sitcom in classe, non solo dal punto di vista linguistico ma anche motivazionale e attitudinale.

Dal questionario è emerso che anche gli studenti italiani consumano frequentemente contenuti in inglese ed uno dei motivi principali per cui guardano film e serie TV è imparare l'inglese. In particolare, preferiscono guardare le serie TV, poiché l'apprendimento della lingua è risultato essere il motivo principale per oltre la metà dei partecipanti quando sono stati intervistati su questo tipo di input. Altri motivi includono la spontaneità dei dialoghi e il desiderio di ascoltare le battute e le espressioni tipiche in lingua originale. Secondo i risultati del questionario, insieme all'avventura, uno dei generi di film preferiti si è rivelato essere la commedia, e un gran numero di serie TV

preferite dai partecipanti sono sitcom. Infine, quasi tutti gli intervistati hanno riferito di ritenere che la loro conoscenza dell'inglese sia migliorata guardando film o serie TV in inglese, sottotitolati o sottotitolati, e si riferivano principalmente alla loro comprensione orale, conoscenza del vocabolario e produzione orale.

In questo studio, gli studenti hanno principalmente espresso il loro entusiasmo per l'integrazione delle normali lezioni di inglese con la visione di sitcom. Tuttavia, per ottenere risultati significativi, tali attività devono essere monitorate e progettate attentamente dagli insegnanti per un periodo di tempo più lungo. La presente ricerca si è sviluppata solo su dati raccolti attraverso sondaggi individuali e una lezione di un'ora. Pertanto, potrebbe essere interessante esplorare gli effetti che le sitcom potrebbero avere sullo sviluppo della conoscenza dell'inglese degli studenti per un periodo di tempo più lungo, con l'integrazione regolare da parte degli insegnanti di sitcom nelle loro lezioni per spiegare argomenti specifici e raggiungere obiettivi linguistici prestabiliti. Per fare ciò, potrebbe essere interessante utilizzare i video come parte delle unità di apprendimento, poiché questo tipo di progettazione didattica consente l'analisi di argomenti utilizzando diversi tipi di approcci che affrontano varie abilità linguistiche.

Per quanto riguarda la ricerca futura, ci sono diversi fattori riguardanti i partecipanti, gli obiettivi di apprendimento ed i metodi di insegnamento che potrebbero richiedere ulteriori indagini. Uno studio simile a quello attuale potrebbe essere condotto su un gruppo più ampio di studenti, includendo attività in classe più diversificate e creative volte ad affrontare lo sviluppo di abilità singolari, ad esempio espressione orale, comprensione della lettura ed espressione scritta. Poi, potrebbe essere interessante esplorare le differenze nello sviluppo delle competenze confrontando i risultati ottenuti dalla visione di serie TV con sottotitoli in inglese con quelli dalla visione dello stesso

materiale audiovisivo con sottotitoli in italiano. Nuovi studi potrebbero coinvolgere di più gli insegnanti e potrebbero sviluppare un'unità di apprendimento che integri le sitcom come parte della lezione di inglese per un periodo più lungo, come presentato nella sezione sulle "raccomandazioni per la pratica". Un altro fattore che potrebbe essere esplorato è l'insegnamento dell'inglese con altri generi di serie TV, da decidere sulla base di un'ulteriore indagine sugli interessi degli studenti, sulla cultura, sull'età e sulla conoscenza dell'inglese.

Lo studio ha rivelato alcune interessanti opinioni degli studenti sulla visione di serie TV in classe. Alcuni partecipanti hanno sottolineato nel feedback che vorrebbero continuare a guardare questo tipo di contenuti in classe per evitare di studiare, ed è stato anche affermato che sarebbe meglio svolgere questo tipo di attività a casa invece di fare i compiti. È necessario specificare due punti principali. La prima è che l'uso di questi materiali non deve in alcun modo sostituire lo studio della lingua basato su libri di testo, risorse scolastiche e linee guida determinate dal Ministero dell'Istruzione e già sperimentate dai docenti. Guardare le serie TV in classe potrebbe essere solo un modo per integrare le lezioni tradizionali di inglese offrendo a insegnanti e studenti un'attività complementare ai libri di testo che, tuttavia, non è fatto per sostituirli. I materiali audiovisivi utilizzati per l'apprendimento delle lingue sono molto spesso interpretati in modo errato, poiché il loro utilizzo è un metodo che tende ad essere recepito dagli studenti come più facile e divertente. Questo materiale nel contesto della classe non dovrebbe in alcun modo essere visto come una pausa dallo studio o una perdita di tempo. Al contrario, deve essere interpretato come un utile strumento aggiuntivo che lo sviluppo della tecnologia ci offre per l'acquisizione dell'inglese. Questo tipo di interpretazione errata potrebbe essere causato dall'idea diffusa che lo studio debba

essere faticoso e che per imparare sia necessario fare sforzi significativi. Ecco perché l'obiettivo di questo studio è stato anche quello di dimostrare che gli obiettivi didattici possono essere raggiunti anche in modo più leggero e meno stressante, utilizzando attività complementari all'apprendimento tradizionale.