Do students know how to learn?
A case study of the language learning strategies used by high school students

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A mia nonna,
mia più grande maestra di vita

A Giuseppe,
mio sostegno e supporto, sempre.

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Introduction

Before starting my academic career at the University, I was often told what was important to study and learn, but I was rarely told how to do so. However, it is not only necessary to know what to learn, but also to know how to learn. This is true for all subjects, and in particular for foreign language learning. For a language learner it is essential not only to receive information on the foreign language, but also to be instructed on how to learn it efficiently, on the strategies to use to deal with learning difficulties and become better learners. A strategy is, in fact, a tool to cope with difficulties in language learning, a problem-oriented action, in the sense that it is elaborated to match the learners' needs, solve specific problems, and support learning. The term strategy comes from στρατηγία, Greek for "generalship"; στρατηγία indicated "the optimal management of troops in a planned campaign (Oxford, 1990: 7) and involves the concept of action planning with a specific goal in mind. In the case of ancient Greek warriors, the aim was defeating enemies and conquer their territories. Of course, learning strategies have nothing to do with war and violence, but the concept of action planning remains. Action is planned to acquire language skills in the most proficient way. Language Learning Strategies will be presented in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

The aim of this thesis, indeed, is to stress the potential utility of language learning strategies, which, according to Joan Rubin (1975), are what can make the difference between successful and less successful learners. The "good" language learner, in other words, is not necessarily naturally skilled (because of his/her personal attitude towards language learning) but actively engaged in activities that enhance his/her own learning; the good language learner does not passively receives input, but s/he is capable of taking control of his/her own learning path: s/he is autonomous. When students learn "how to use effective strategies for language learning tasks, they begin to be self-regulated learners […] and seek opportunities for indipendent learning" (Chamot, 1999: 53). Hence the need for a strategy-based instruction, which drive students' towards autonomy enhancement. The goals of strategy-based instruction, indeed, are:

1. the improvement of abilities such as concentration, memory, though;
2. the capacity of getting engaged both in problem solving activities and in abstract reasoning processes;
3. the ability of combining both inductive and deductive reasoning processes, often considered opposite rather than complementary;
4. the aware choose of cognitive procedures which differ according to unique contexts and contents;
5. the capacity of constantly monitoring one's own learning processes and way of thinking, together with the possibility of defining configuration which facilitate the learning process[1] (Musello, 2005: 38).

The concept of autonomy in language learning will be dealt with in Chapter 2 of this thesis, along with a definition of the "good language learner's" main characteristics, outlined on the basis of the literature reviewed. In addition, the second chapter will introduce some tools which could be exploited by learners who want to learn autonomously: these are the Web 2.0 and CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) tools, which have been seen to have the potential to foster autonomy in learning and to enhance learning motivation. According to the literature reviewed, successful language learners are not only those who use the learning strategies and learning tools at their disposal to achieve their learning goals autonomously, but also those who work hard to keep their motivation alive. Motivation, indeed, is a crucial factor influencing Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and motivational related issues will be discussed in both Chapter 1 and Chapter 2.

Although it may be an extremely influential factor in SLA, motivation is only one of many other factors, which will be discussed in Chapter 1. In addition, Chapter 1 will present the models related to SLT (Second Language Teaching). However, it goes beyond the scope of the dissertation to analyse in great detail every contribution to the field: instead, the general trends will be presented. I will trace the history of second language teaching methods, shedding light on the evolution from the teacher-centered model to the student-centered one, the latter stimulating the student's learning autonomy and self-organization. In recent years, indeed, there has been a reformulation of the traditional teaching hierarchy, which for centuries was dominated by the figure of the teacher. Today, a fundamental change of perspective has occurred, with the learner being placed at the centre of his/her own learning process and made responsible for it. Before focusing on both Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Teaching, I will devote

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[1] my translation

some words to the broad concept of language: a phenomenon which is at the same time individual, social and cultural.

The third and final chapter of the thesis evolves around the presentation of a case study and a workshop, which I have conducted to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: "Do students have any experience of Language Learning Strategies?"

RQ2: "How could they be made more aware of Language Learning Strategies?"

To answer to the first question, I needed to collect empirical data. The instrument used was a questionnaire, through which I surveyed a representative sample of 141 high school students in Reggio Calabria. In Chapter 3 I will present and discuss the results, underlining the related findings. Of course, as these considerations and remarks are only limited to the sample surveyed, this study does not aim at providing universal working truths or conclusions, but reflections on the basis of the collected data. In addition, considering the potential usefulness of Language Learning Strategies, I decided to conduct a workshop on strategy-based instruction to help some students with learning difficulties and an evident lack of motivation, who attend an Afterschool Centre in Reggio Calabria. The workshop was organized with two questions in mind:

RQ1: "What is the reason for the learners' apparent lack of motivation?"

RQ2: "Could language strategies actually help to make them more motivated?"

All the research questions will be answered in Chapter 3, on the basis of the case study and the workshop conducted and on the literature reviewed.

Chapter 1

An overview of Second Language Teaching

The aim of this first chapter is to attempt to provide an outline of the approaches to second language teaching which have been adopted over the years. For reasons of simplification, in this thesis the term "second language" refers to both second and foreign language.[2] However, it goes beyond the scope of the dissertation to analyse in deep detail every contribution to the field: instead, the general trends will be presented. I will trace the history of second language teaching methods, shedding light, in the end, on the evolution from the teacher-centered model to the student-centered one, the latter stimulating the student's learning autonomy and self-organization. In recent years, indeed, there has been a reformulation of the traditional teaching hierarchy, which for centuries was dominated by the figure of the teacher. Today, a fundamental change of perspective has occurred, with the learner being placed at the centre of his/her own learning process and made responsible for it. What is more, the change also involves the terminology and the shift from *student* to *learner* should not be overlooked: it is crucial, because even the variation of the terminology is the result of a change in ideology.

1.1 What is a language?

Before taking a look at the long history of second language teaching, it is necessary to devote some words to the concept of language. In Italian (and in other languages) two different terms are employed to refer either to the faculty of communicating proper of human beings ('linguaggio', to use the Italian term) or to the specific languages employed certain groups of people (Italian 'lingua'). On the contrary, in English- as Lyons (1981)

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[2] According to scholars, a language is "foreign" if it is not present in the environment in which it is learned; on the contrary, the language present in the environment in which it is learned/acquired, but different from one's own mother language, is called 'second'. For example, a student should call 'foreign' the languages s/he learns at home, while an immigrant should call 'second' the language s/he learns (or spontaneously acquires) in the host country (Balboni, 2013).

notes- for both meanings the same term is employed. Therefore, the English term is a more general one and its meaning has to be deduced from the context.

Pichiassi (1999) gives a definition of language by simply analysing the common patterns (taken from daily spoken language) in which the word "language" occurs. According to the author, this shows how each of us, even a non-linguistic expert, has his/her own idea of language, which is purely intuitive. The analysed occurrences indeed reflect how the idea of language is commonly perceived. We often say "to use a language", "to possess a language", that language "works" in a certain way. When we say we are "using" a language, it means we conceive the language as a useful tool to do something: in this case to communicate. "To possess a language" indicates we perceive it as something personal, individual, which belongs to us. By saying that language "works" in a certain way, we stress the fact that it is a mechanism with its own internal structure and functioning.

Language can achieve several functions, classified by Roman Jakobson (1960), who further developed the model borrowed by Karl Bühler. The latter identified three linguistic functions: the informative function, through which facts or objects are described; the expressive function, through which feelings are expressed; the appellative function through which the speaker appeals to his interlocutor or attempts to persuade him/her to act in a certain way. Jakobson refers to Bühler's informative function with the name "referential" and adds some more categories to the existing model:

aesthetic/poetic, whose focus is language beauty, and which is achieved through an accurate word choice. It is usually adopted in poetry or literary prose, but it can also be used in self-reflective texts; it is introspective and self-examining in texts where the author expresses his own wonderings and thoughts;

metalingual function: which involves the use of language for the language description;

phatic function, exploited to establish, prolong or interrupt a conversation, to check that the communicative channel is working, to attract attention or to confirm one's interlocutor is listening (e.g. "Hello, do you hear me? […] Are you listening?') (Jakobson, 1960: 355).

Although Jakobson identifies six different linguistic functions, "we could, however, hardly find verbal messages that would fulfil only one function". In other words, the functions are always intertwined, although "the verbal structure of a message depends primarily on the predominant function" (Jakobson, 1960: 353).

The study of language as communication led to the elaboration of the Hallidayan model of discourse analysis, based on what he called "systemic functional linguistics" (SFL). This model is based on the assumption that "grammar has to interface with what goes on outside language: with the happenings and conditions of the world, and with the social processes we engage in" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004: 25). In addition, it "builds a specific linguistic description into the more general framework of language as communication and as an expression of the sociocultural process" (Munday, 2016: 323). Linguistic choices, indeed, are influenced by many factors, the most important one being (in Halliday's perspective) the sociocultural environment: this includes "conventions operating at the time and place of text production; […] social and cultural factors; […] political, historical or legal conditions" (Munday, 2016: 143).

Because of the many functions that language carries out, it is defined as flexible and versatile:

> we can use a language to give vent to our emotions and feelings, to solicit the co-operation of our fellows; to make threats or promises; to issue commands, ask questions or make statements. We can make reference to past, present and future; to things far removed from the situation of utterance […]. No other system of communication, human or non-human, would seem to have anything like the same degree of flexibility and versatility (Lyons, 1981: 19)

Other scholars see language as a living organism (see for example Pichiassi, 1999): it is alive and like a human being it grows, it expands itself, it is related to other languages, it dies. Like real human beings, languages are "not immune to change" (Brown et al., 1984: 20). This means they are not static, but rather dynamic and change constantly: "new grammatical constructions can, and do, arise in the course of time" (Lyons, 1981: 6). Such change is "in the direction of simplification, conceived as universal tendency toward the use of minimum effort" (Bright, 1997: 84).

Grammar changes, and words do as well: they either change their meaning, fall out of use, or completely disappear, being replaced by new ones. Creativity is one of the features of language: it is the capacity to construct new utterances and coin new words (Lyons, 1981; Graffi & Scalise, 2002; Crystal & Robins, 2020). In addition, "a native user is able to produce and understand an infinite number of correct well-formed sentences": this is what is referred as language productivity (Crystal & Robins, 2020).

Attempts are often made to prevent language from changing. Bright (1997: 81) provides the example of institutions such as the Académie Française or the Academia

Real de la Lengua Española who "have been given official responsibility for maintaining the linguistics status quo". Such attempts involve the use of *prescriptive grammars* and are made to "discourage departure from the established norms". Yet what is the difference between descriptive and prescriptive grammar? The former is meant to describe the grammar rules in use; the latter is meant to establish the grammatical norms that must be followed. Therefore, grammars which adopt a descriptive approach "describe the grammatical forms and patterns actually used in published texts", contrarily to grammar adopting a prescriptive approach, "prescribing explicitly the forms that should be used in 'standard English' " (Biber et al., 1999: 18).

> The contrast that is relevant here is the one that holds between describing how things are and prescribing how things ought to be[…].An alternative to 'prescriptive' in the sense in which it contrasts with 'descriptive', is 'normative'"[…] Prescriptive dos and don'ts are commands (Do/Don't say X!); descriptive dos and don'ts are statements (People do/don't say X) (Lyons, 1981: 47-48).

Instead, "descriptive grammarians ask the question, "What is English (or another language) like" […] prescriptive grammariasn ask "What should English be like" " (Finegan, 2020). Yet prescriptive practices can only limit linguistic change, but not stop it. Linguistic change is inevitable. What is more, some of the grammatical features that are now considered strict, rigid, "unalterably corret", once were condemned as "corruption or debasement of traditional standards of usage" (Lyons, 1981: 52).

1.1.1 Language as a system

One definition of language is provided by Crystal (2020):

> Language, a system of conventional spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. The functions of language include communication, the expression of identity, play, imaginative expression, and emotional release. (Crystal & Robins, 2020)

Language is not only verbal, but there can also nonverbal languages, such as signed and gesture languages, which, although they are not spoken, have the same legitimacy of the other languages. Verbal languages can be accompanied with facial expressions or bodily gestures, too. These are called paralinguistic activities and are meaningful in the sense that convey a specific meaning. Some paralinguistic activities are conventional (such as expressions of happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, triumph and so on); others are culture-

bound and vary from language to language (for example in some countries head nodding is not assertive but it means 'no'!).

As concerns verbal language, it is an ability of human beings, because of their biological conformation and because of the peculiar cerebral component (Lyons, 1981). Verbal language is made up of another five subsystems (grammatical, phonological, morphophonemic, semantic, phonetic), which have different features, but which are intertwined and connected to each other. Such a system is made up of "arbitrary […] symbols by means of which members of a speech community communicate" (Calimag, 1968: 48). There is no logic indeed in the formulation of the language: in other words, there is generally no reason why a determined object has received its current name: "the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary" (Saussure, 1959)[3]. Even onomatopoeias have a certain degree of arbitrariness. Some scholars (see for example Lyons, 1981) consider them non-arbitrary, because such terms sound like the noise they refer to. However, if such words were non-arbitrary, why do onomatopoeias differ from one language to another? In English, for example, the onomatopoeic sound for a dog bark is "woof", while in Italian it is "bau".

Furthermore, language has been defined not only as an arbitrary, but also as a "conventional system" (Kehoe, 1960:14). Language is defined "conventional" because it is mutually agreed upon by a social group, who arbitrarily elaborate a conventional code to communicate. As Flew (1971: 65) stresses, "no word could be said to have a use except in so far as some language group or sub-group gives it a use and recognizes as correct the usage appropriated to that use". The first to refer to the language as an arbitrary social system was the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He distinguished between *langue* and *parole*, where *langue* is a social and abstract system, the totality of signs and possible realizations; the *parole*, on the contrary, is the practical realization of the *langue*, made of each utterance produced by the speaker. If the *langue* is abstract, the *parole* is concrete. In other words, while speaking, the abstract *langue* is verbalized into *parole* (Saussure, 1959; Lyons, 1981; Graffi & Scalise, 2002).

After Saussure's classification, Lyons (1981) distinguished between *language-system* and *language-behaviour*. The latter comes from the Saussurian concept of *parole;*

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[3] English transaltion by Wade Baskin

the former is linked to Saussure's *langue*. Lyons (1981: 10) describes the two terms as follows: "a **language-system** is a social phenomenon, or institution, which of itself is purely abstract, in that it has no physical existence, but which is actualized on particular occasions in the **language-behaviour** of individual members of the language-community". Other formal features of the language are duality and discreteness. The property "duality" refers to the two levels the language is made up of, which are the level of units and that of elements: with a limited number of linguistic units (e.g. phonemes) it is possible to create an infinite number of linguistic elements (e.g. words). Each phoneme is discrete and if even one phoneme in a word is changed, as consequence the word's meaning changes (Lyons, 1981).

1.1.2 Language and society

The fact that a group of people created it makes language a social phenomenon. Among the first language acquisition hypotheses, indeed, there is the "social interaction hypothesis", which collocates language origins within a social context. Even primitive men and women used to live in groups, because together it was easier to protect themselves against attacks (Yule, 2017). In order to live together within such social groups, a form of communication was needed. Language is a means that makes communication occur and it is for this particular necessity that language was born: the need to communicate with others. Evidence that language is a social phenomenon is provided by the fact that, if isolated from the community, a human being cannot develop any linguistic faculty. For example, in the past there have been children who have lived with no social contact until puberty and who have therefore not acquired any language (Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Graffi & Scalise, 2002).

As a social phenomenon, the language makes a social group cohesive but, at the same time, it is a distinctive element of a social group, which, together with other elements, makes such social groups differ from one another. The linguistic variety employed by a determined social group is called "sociolect". Yule (2017: 292) provides the example of the word "home", which is pronounced by Scottish people differently according to their social status: middle class members pronounce it [hom], while those who belong to the working class say [heɪm]. Another useful example is that of the different pronounciation of the English /r/ sound, which is pronounced by the working class; often pronounced by

the middle class; never pronounced by the middle-high class, who were heard saying sentences such as "*Oh, that's mahvellous, dahling!*" (Yule, 2017: 293).

In the past, when the social class separation was more rigid, speech was "a social barometer of considerable importance" (Kehoe,1968: 2). In the late 1960s Kehoe (1968: 2) wrote that the linguistic "provincial forms, though not inferior in themselves, often label[ed] the speaker an "outsider". The very first sociological investigations of language were conducted by a British sociologist, Bernstein, in the late 1950s. Being an English teacher at the London City Day College, he managed to investigate the relationship between language and social factors. He noticed that there was a systematic relation between them: the middle class tended to use what he called "*formal* code"; those who belonged to the working class, on the contrary, were more oriented towards the use of a "*public* code. Code is understood as "form of usage"; it is, therefore, a variety of language. As consequence, the middle-class child, who used at home a more formal code, was advanteged with respect to the working class child at school, since school favored the middle-class code. In the past, then, the "subphonemic differences" were "socially […] meaningful" (Lyons, 1981: 272).

Today there is no longer such an old clear-cut or watertight distinction among social classes, but a rather fluid one. However, the subphonemic variations remain meaningful to give us hints about our interlocutor, for example about his/her geographical provenance or education. These are the aspects studied in the field of the sociolinguistics, a branch of linguistics which "seeks socially relevant explanations for regular patterns of variation in language use" (Spolsky, 1998: 5). As concerns geographical origins, it is true that speakers from different places have difference accents or utter vowels differently. Speakers, indeed, speak different dialects. The dialect acknowledged by the whole English community as the standard one is Standard English, defined as "superposed variety" since it was "imposed from above over the range of regional dialects" (Trudgill, 2000: 7). The accent associated with Standard English is the so called "received pronounciation" or "BBC English". However, within Standard English there are several variants (e.g. Standard American English, Standard Scottish English), which differ in vocabulary, accent and grammar details. Standard English is highly valued and has a high prestige, it is considered to be:

'correct', 'beautiful', 'nice', 'pure' and so on. Other nonstandard, non-prestige varieties are often held to be 'wrong', 'ugly', 'corrupt' or 'lazy'. Standard English ,moreover is frequently considered to be *the* English language, which inevitably leads to the view that other varieties of English are some kind of deviation from a norm" (Trudgill, 2000: 8).

However, although Standard English is the most important English variety, all other dialects "are equally 'good' as linguistic systems" (Trudgill, 2000: 8).

Furthermore, the linguistic choices made by two interlocutors also give information about the relationship between the two. Depending on the level of familiarity with the interlocutor and on the situational context in which sentences are uttered, the speaker will in fact adopt either a formal or a colloquial register. In other words, the linguistic choices made by the speaker will be different when s/he speaks with different interlocutors (Spolsky, 1998; Trudgill, 2000). In particular, Spolsky (1998) talks about the so called "audience design", since the speaker chooses his/her register and style according to the audience s/he addresses. The level of formality[4] also determines the style adopted by the speaker. In English, a formal style is caracterised by a certain use of greetings, address terms and titles (e.g.: Sir/ Madame/Mr/Mrs/Mss). "English greetins range from an informal 'Hi!' through a neutral 'Good morning' to a slowly disappearning formal 'How do you do!'" (Spolsky, 1998: 20).

Going back to register features, one of them is the possibility of using of jargon: i.e. a language variety formed by a specialized terminology which refers to specific semantic fields. There can be different types of jargons, such as: medical jargon, military jargon, technical jargon, sport jargon, etc. Common among teenagers is the slang, a very colloquial variety made up of neologisms (which may become out of fashion very soon), swearing and taboo words (Yule, 2017). "Slang is a kind of jargon marled by its rejection of formal rules, its comparative freshness and its common ephemerality, and its marked use to claim **solidarity**" (Spolsky, 1998: 35). Speaking slang is sometimes done to feel part of a group, to be "accepted" by the other group members. "One way to characterize **slang** is as special kinds of "intimate" or in-group speech" (Spolsky,1998: 25). Spolsky (1998) also mentions the concept of "accommodation": this means the modification of one's speech. He mentions 'accomodation' in the sense of accent modification after moving to another country. However, this concept can be also analysed from a

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[4] "Degree of care taken with speech" (Spolsky,1998: 122)

sociological point of view, in the case of linguistic change made to join a determined group.

> The same factor also accounts for the tendency to speak like one's friends and peers, and to modify one's speech either in their direction or to some other socially desirable prestige group. Consciously and unconsciously one uses one's speech […] to express a claim of solidarity and social group membership. (Spolsky, 1998: 35).

Language is fundamental not only to communicate with others, but also to enter their group. It is linked to the "social identity" of the speaker and to the definition of the self.

> Language, after all, belongs to a person's social being: it is part of one's identity, and it is used to convey this identity to other people. The learning of a foreign language involves far more than simply learning skills, or a system of rules, or a grammar; it involves an alteration in self-image, the adoption of new social and cultural behaviours and ways of being, and therefore has a significant impact on the social nature of the learner (Williams, 1994: 77).

1.1.3 Language and identity

Language can be different according to the person who speaks it. Each of us uses a vocabulary that is different from the vocabulary adopted by others, called "idiolect". "Language also differentiates […] one individual from another by idiolect" (Kehoe, 1968: 2). An idiolect is the particular linguistic variant used either by a single speaker or by a very small group. Usually, people who have the same level of education or do the same job have a similar idiolect (Yule, 2017). It is fundamental to shed light on the adjective similar, because idiolects can resemble each other, but they cannot be the same.

Klammer et al. (2007: 448) explain:

> Because each of us belongs to different social groups, we each speak a language variety made up of a combination of features slightly different from those characteristics of any other speaker of the language. The language variety unique to a single speaker of a language is called an idiolect. Your idiolect includes the vocabulary appropriate to your various interests and activities, pronunciations reflective of the region in which you live or have lived, and variable styles of speaking that shift subtly depending on whom you are addressing.

It is clear that many factors influence the process of formation of an individual's idiolect: it is something unique, a kind of personal dialect which depends on many factors, not only the type of job or education, but also personal fields of interests, geographical origin or living place, belonging to a determined social group.

In the end, language builds up the self in the sense that it influences the construction of one's individuality, by providing "the means of identifying oneself" (Tabouret-Keller,

1997: 315). But such identity is often built either in contrast or in relation to other individuals. Therefore, it can be stated that "individuals are likely to have a repertoire of subjectivity (i.e., multiple identities) which is socially and culturally constructed, negotiated, and jointly enacted with others in the interaction" (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010: 106). Also, language gives the speaker the feeling of belonging to a group: this happens because of the tendency of identifying oneself in relation to the linguistic group within which the same language is spoken: "as human beings in the course of socialisation we attain social identity as members of a specific group" (Neuer, 2003: 54). For this reason, it is not surprising that, when abroad, discovering a community that speaks one's own native language, makes one feel automatically part of it, even if such people are actual strangers. Despite this, hearing someone else speaking one's mother language gives the illusion, even just for a while, of being "home".

1.1.4 Language and culture

In the previous section the mutual relationship between language and identity was analysed. It can be defined mutual because, on the one hand, individuals shape their own idiolect and, on the other hand, language influences the determination of one's identity. Language has the power of influencing not only the perception and the definition of the self, but even our conception of the outside world. Language, indeed, is the mirror of the culture we have inherited; it conveys the values of the society in which we are born; it expresses the way we perceive the world, and it may also influence such perception.

The relation between language and thought is a quite controversial one. The most widely debated hypothesis that has been formulated on this topic remains so far the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which was named after the scholars Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf. The first was more oriented towards a stronger formulation of the theory, while the second towards a more moderate one. According to the "strong" formulation, called linguistic determinism, language affects and determines our idea of the world, in short, according to Sapir language shapes the human thought: we would think in a certain way because our linguistic habits "predispose certain choices of interpretation" (Whorf, 1956: 134).

However, not all scholars supported the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. One example criticizing the latter comes from McWhorter (2014). A tribe has been discovered which

does not have words to express numbers: an ancient Brazilian tribe, the Pirahã, uses only two numeral adjectives: 1 and 2. "It's not that the Pirahã of the Amazon have been misportrayed […]. A Pirahã woman genuinely cannot tell you how many children she has, because the language has no words for numbers" (McWhorter, 2014: 14). Since they do not employ any numerals but 1 and 2, does it mean that they do not know how to count? Other cultures have a more limited range of words for colours. Does it mean that they are not able to distinguish colours like English speakers do? There are people in Australia who express space differently. While British English speakers say that things are located either in front of, behind of , to the left or the right, the Guugu Yimithirr people refer to the spatial collocation only through cardinal directions, so that "if a tree is in front of them and to the north, then they say it's north of them, and even when they turn around, then do not say it's behind them- they say it's north, which it still is. In front of them is now south" (McWhorter, 2014: 18). Does it mean they conceive space wrongly? Such claims, (made in the strong view's perspective) would be quite extreme. Therefore the "weak" formulation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (the linguistic relativity) appears preferable: language influences the human thought and the way we conceive and perceive the outside world, but such influence is just relative, as language is only one of a wide set of influencing factors. Therefore, the theory of linguistic relativity does not claim that the linguistic structure constrains what people think or perceive, only that it tends to influence it (Kramsch, 1998). To the question "Which was first: the language patterns or the culture norms?" Whorf answers: "In main they have grown up together" (Whorf, 1956: 134).

"Concepts, propositions, frames, schemas, scripts, prototypes and more complex 'images of the outside world' even within a given socio-culture may vary considerably according to individual knowledge and experience", claims Neuer (2003: 44), who presents an interesting example of how people belonging to different cultures provided different representations of a tree. Indeed, he asked a group of students to spontaneously draw a tree, and the results were quite different according to the students' cultural roots: "their concept of tree was influenced by their experiences of their own environment […] their 'images of the world' remained tightly knit to their own previous socio-cultural experience" (Neuer, 2003: 45-46). In particular, a student from Morocco draw a palm; that from China draw a poplar; the Greek student draw a tree similar to an olive tree (see Figure 2); the majority of German natives draw the trees presented in Figure 1.
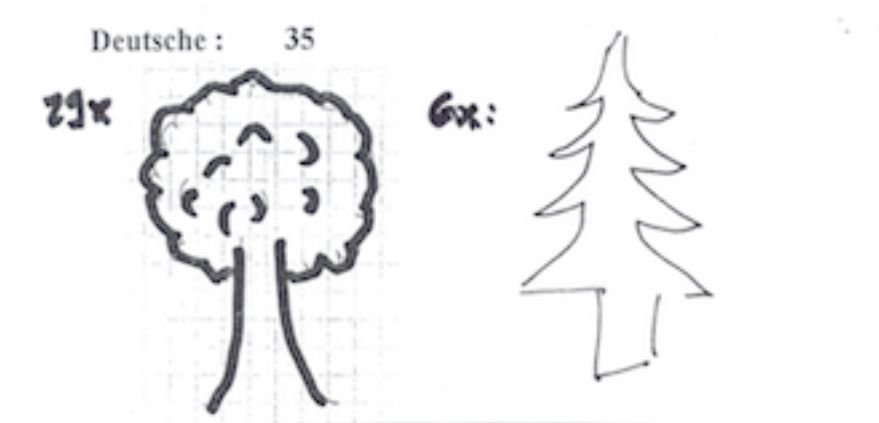
Figure 1- German students' drawings
Source Neuer (2003: 45)
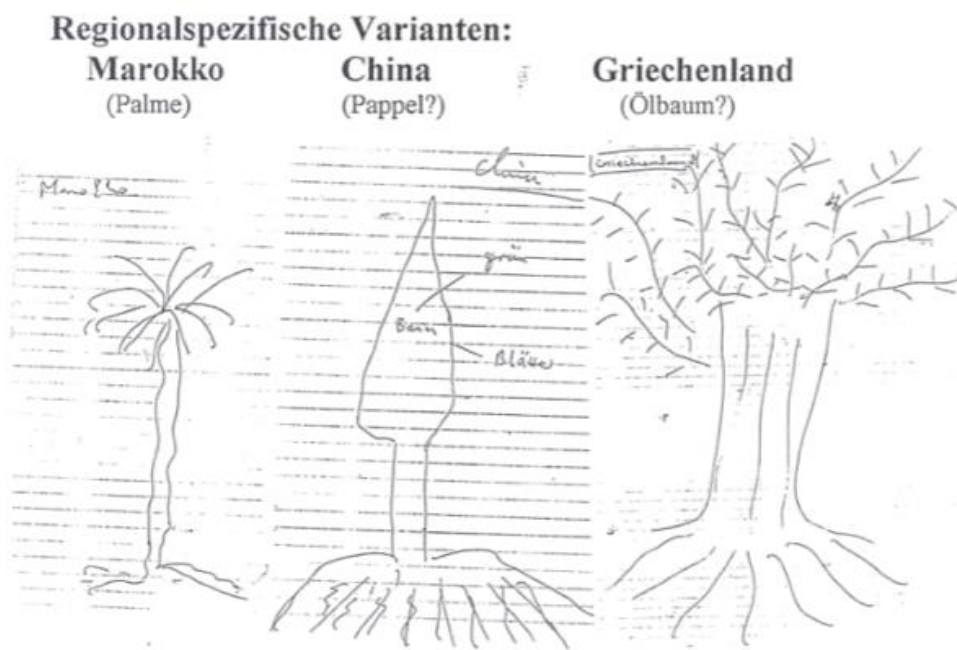
Figure 2- Drawings by Moroccan, Chinese and Greek students
Source: Neuer (2003: 45)

The example shows how people are not blank pages but rather interpret the world in relation to their own experiences: such experiences are pieces of a background knowledge which inevitably becomes visible.

The speakers' different cultural backgrounds also influence the speech acts' realization and their interpretation. "Speech acts are a challenging area of pragmatic

behavior because of the possible misfit between what one does not say or write in a language in the given speech act and what is meant by it" (Cohen, 2017: 428-429). Speech acts can achieve several functions, such as: greeting, complimenting, apologizing, complaining (and so on). Different linguistic groups achieve these functions differently. For example, teasing may be considered a joke by some people (therefore funny and tolerable), but impolite by others (Cohen, 2017). Refusals of offers may be considered unpolite in some cultures, but a necessary ritual in some others: for example the Chinese culture considers polite to accept a gift/invitation not immediatly, but after an initial refusal[5]. As concerns apologies, Russian native speakers, for example, where found to be less likely to apologize than native speakers of English or Hebrew are. According to Russians, a person should not feel insulted if openly criticized: criticism may sometimes be an healty approach wich leads to exchange of opinions and such healty criticism does not call for apologies (Cohen, 1989). Analysing French greetings, it emerged that French speakers use to repeat and emphasize what said by the interlocutor, to be very actively involved in the conversation by requesting confirmations or more details [6].

While realizing a speech act, turn-taking must be taken into account, too. In most countries it is ruled by strict norms and must be severely respected: the breaking of turn-taking rules is seen as sign of impoliteness. (Spolsky, 1998; Trudgill, 2000). Another form of behaviour that could be judged unpolite is speaking for another person. It might be viewed as signalling not solidarity, but, rather, authority: this happens when a mother speaks for her child, a husband for his wife or a teacher for his student (Kramsch, 1998). While speaking, the physical distance among interlocutors is also meaningful, since it conveys information about the social relationship among the speakers. For example, Hall (1966) provided a classification of physical distance linked to the social relationship between speakers and to their degree of intimacy. He noticed that the distance between speakers during a conversation is different whether people are intimate, close friends, family members, colleagues or if communication occurs in a more formal context. Different cultures have a different "comfort zones" If such zone is not respected, it may either embarrass or even annoy the interlocutor". Africans, for example, maintain a closer distance than Europeans do while speaking with an interlocutor.

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[5] cf https://carla.umn.edu/speechacts/refusals/index.html for further information.

[6] see https://carla.umn.edu/speechacts/greetings/french.html .

Although these are only few examples, it is clear that lack of knowledge on pragmatical norms may have negative effects. Sometimes, even if pragmatical norms are known, pragmatically unappropriate output may be generated. The causes of pragmatic failure are several, among them there also are: overgeneralization of L2 norms and resistance to L2 norms. In the first case, L2 norms are correctly individuated, but overemployed (it means wrongly extended to other areas) (Cohen, 2009). Cohen (2009) provides the example of a Korean learner of American English who, considering Americans particularly frank and direct, asks his interlocutor about his salary, remaining in the end surpised by his reluctancy to answer. This pragmatic failure is clearly due to the overgeneralization of the norm that American English speakers are usually frank and direct. Another example is that of an Italian native speaker who tells his nonnative friend that is not only gesturing too much, but also wrongly using gestures, meaning something different from what he maybe intends.

Reluctancy to adopt L2 norms occurs when the latter are not accepted, for they are perceived as strange. An English native speaker of Indian as L2 who refuses to say the Indian equivalent of "Did you eat yet" (Cohen, 2009: 262) because s/he does not perceive it as a greeting, he shows to be reluctant to the L2 norms.

Furthermore, not only are words meaningful, but even silcences. Particularly interesting is the example provided by Cohen (2009), who explains that, during an academic meeting, he led a round of applause for a Japanese speaker, interpreting his silence as he ended his remarks, when he actually had not. This happened because in the Japanese culture silences and pauses are more recurrent than in Western culture and the lack of knowledge of this particular cultural charchteristic resulted in a pragmatic failure. Even the act of stuttering can be meaningful: "Japanese speakers may stutter or stammer in their delivery of apologies or refusals as a sign of humilty rather as an indication of disfluency" (Cohen, 2019: 5).

In conclusion, if interlocutors with a different L1 do not understand each other, sometimes it is not a mere fact of translation, but due to the lack of a shared cultural background instead (Kramsch, 1998). Learning a language, indeed, means learning the cultural models linked to it (De Angelis & Bertocchini, 1978).

> Learning a foreign language always entails learning a second culture, even if you never actually set foot in the foreign country where the language is spoken. Language and culture are bound up with each other and interrelated […], every person is part of a *culture*. […] So, if you're planning to carry

on some sort of communication with people who speak or write a given language, you need to understand the culture out of which the language emerges (Brown, 1989: 65).

To do so, first of all it is necessary to overcome what De Angelis and Bertocchini (1978: 10) call "cultural egocentrism": knowing another language means coming in contact with other cultures and ways of living, which are often different from our own (of course different does not mean inferior/superior). It is fundamental to look at other culture taking the distance from one's own, abandoning our "socio-cultural glasses" (Neuer, 2003: 47). Yet the "view from outside upon our own world […] helps us to realise that no all people share our view of our own world and, as consequence, may have opinions about us which to us appear as prejudices" (Neuer, 2003: 49).

Similarly, teaching a language does not just mean explaining grammatical rules, checking exercises and giving marks: it also means opening the doors of another world which is characterized by different ways of living, different cultures and different traditions. The knowledge of the target culture's fundamental aspects should be one of the main goals of language learning. To this aim, Byram & Esarte-Sarries (1991) proposed a model to integrate the learning of culture in the foreign language class. This model involves cultural awareness raising and cultural experience, posing "the question of change from monocultural to intercultural competence" (Byram, 1991: 24) and exhorting students to have direct experiences of the target culture. The model provides a theoretical background for the Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) development, to bridge the gap between the two target cultures: it is a tool to mediate between cultures. In order to achieve the ICC, it is first of all necessary to be curious about other cultures and willing to discover their products, practices and traditions and habits; to be willing of suspending beliefs and prejudices (Byram, 1997).

Language teaching within an intercultural dimension not only helps learners to acquire the linguistic competence needed to communicate, but also "develops their intercultural competence i.e. their ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality" (Byram et al., 2002: 10). Language teaching and culture teaching should therefore never be separated.

1.2 Second Language Learning and influencing factors

To use Ellis' words, the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is "the systematic study of how people acquire a second language (often referred to as an L2)" (Ellis, 1997: 3). SLA studies aim at describing and explaining the second language acquisition process, and at identifying the SLA influencing factors, which facilitate some students rather than others. Before analysing second language acquisition factors let us clarify the use of the term "acquisition". Traditionally, acquisition has been seen as something natural and unconscious, typical of the first language, while "learning" has been seen as a conscious process, typical of a second (or foreign) language. The first person to make such distinction was Krashen. However, despite his own theorization,

 himself was the first to talk about "Second Language Acquisition" to refer to the learning of both first and second (or foreign) languages.

Today the debate on SLA is still on-going, and no clear-cut hypothesis has been elaborated. Several attempts have been made to investigate second language acquisition, most of which were harshly criticized and rejected. Examples are:

- the behaviourist theory, according to which the second language acquisition process is determined by the formation of mental habits, i.e. recurring patterns which are the result of the imitation and repetition of native speakers' utterances;

- the cognitive theory, which affirms that second language acquisition occurs thanks to knowledge systems built up though experience and practice, which can be called on for speaking and understanding;

- the constructionist theory, according to which the learner develops ("constructs") mental representations of the target language while s/he learns it and therefore, second language acquisition is seen as an internal process, which occurs only within the learner, without necessarily speaking or writing (Lightbown & Spada, 1993).

Krashen's (1985) model of Second Language Acquisition is maybe the most influential one and raised the issue of the role consciousness plays in the second language acquisition process. Krashen's theory of Second Language Acquisition is made up of five hypotheses:

1. learning/acquisition;

2. monitor;

3. natural order;

4. input;

5. affective filter.

As concerns the *acquisition/learning* process, according to Krashen (1985) they are interrelated and not completely separated. Krashen found a correlation between them: acquisition can lead to learning, it means that unconscious acquisition can become conscious, but not the reverse.

The *monitor hypothesis* is based on the principle of self-correction of the learner, who, after several mistakes, finally manages to correct him/herself. This self-control occurs when the learner has enough time to reflect on the language structure and on the linguistic form (something which does not occur during a normal conversation).

Natural order hypothesis: it affirms the existence of a natural order of language learning in adult foreign language learning. In other words, some structures are learned before others, according to their difficulty and frequency.

What is more, learners learn the language through the *input* received from the external world. The input the learner receives are "samples of language to which a learner is exposed" (Ellis, 1997: 5). Once the input is acquired, it is said to become "intake" and it becomes easier to acquire more difficult inputs (*i*+1). The teacher can regulate the input they provide to their students, in the same way as parents regulate their speech with babies, commonly known with the name of "baby talk". While speaking with a beginner, the native speaker has the instinct of selecting a speech that the interlocutor might easily understand (this practice is known as "foreigner talk").

The main difficulty scholars faced was the role of consciousness in acquisition. How does input become intake? According to Schmidt (1990: 139) this happens consciously: "if noticed, it becomes intake". Noticing is in fact a conscious operational process which leads to awareness: the speaker is conscious of what s/he perceives and notices. Also, consciousness can mean intention: if something is done counsciously, it means it is done intentionally; consciousness can involves knowledge: one cannot know something without being conscious of it (Schmidt, 1990). Learners may be unconsciously exposed to a number of grammar rules and constructions typical of the second language; however, unconscious learning (which Schmidt names "subliminal languge learning") "is impossible, and that intake is what learners consciosly notice" (Schmidt, 1990: 149).

Going back to Krashen's theory, the last hypothesis on which the theory is based on is that of the *affective filter*. This filter is like a barrier that blocks the language learning process. It is erected by a high level of stress and anxiety, demotivation, fear of being judged or of making mistakes: all these factors negative influence the learner and activate the filter (the barrier). This hypothesis is based on the assumption that the learner's emotional state plays a key-role in language acquisition. When the learner is anxious the affective filter is up and the acquisition is obstacle; when the learner is not anxious, then the filter is down and lets the input necessary for the acquisition pass. As Krashen postulates, "comprehensible input is necessary for acquisition, but it is not sufficient. The acquirer needs to be 'open' to the input" (Krashen, 1985: 3). This openness to the input necessary for acquisition occurs when the affective filter is "down" and the input can reach the LAD (Language Acquisition Device)[7]. Otherwise, when the filter is 'up' "the mental block […] prevents acquirers from fully utilizing the comprehensible input they receive for language acquisition" (Krashen, 1985: 3). This theory has been supported by recent research, which has demonstrated that

> the body produces one type of hormone when a stressful situation is seen as a challenge (eustress) and a different type of hormone when a stressful situation is seen as a threat (distress) to a person's capability to function and the stressor appears inescapable. Thus the emotional response of the individual to a specific situation plays a determining role in that person's cognitive functioning- either to fight, resist, or avoid the learning situation or to be open to new opportunitie (Ferro, 1993: 32).

The older the learner is, the higher the filter's influence may be. This should not be surprising, because the fear of being judged can be higher in adults than in children: adults are in fact more sensitive than children to what other people think of them. Therefore, it is not surprising that age is acknowledged as one of second language acquisition influencing factors.

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[7] The LAD concept is taken from Chomsky's nativist theory. According to Chomsky, indeed, humans are born with the instinctive or "innate facility" for acquiring language. This acquisition occurs because of the existence of a component of human thought, a device- namely the *language acquisition device-* which lets acquisition occur. This is in contrast to empiricism, the "blank slate" or tabula rasa view, which claims that the human brain has inborn capabilities for learning from the environment (Balboni, 2013).

1.2.1 Age

The majority of scholars argue that age is one of the factors which influence second language acquisition (see for example Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Naiman et al*.,* 1996; Griffiths, 2008). According to several studies, adult learners are advantaged with respect to young learners, because of the former have the "*cognitive maturity"* and "*metalinguistic awareness"* that young learners lack, as Lightbown & Spada (1993: 21) also argue. This is the recurrent trend of the early stages of language acquisition. However, in the long run, younger learners usually show more evident progresses and manage to reach either the same or even higher linguistic levels than older students do. In other words, students who start younger achieve higher results in the end, even if they are slower than adults in the first stages of language learning. (Singleton, 1989; Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Ellis, 1997). Examples come from the observation of immigrant groups in a natural environment. If one thinks about the generations of immigrants, it is evident how immigrants' children reach a more native-like linguistic level rather than their parents, who see their children passing them. Furthermore, age "[sets] limits on the development of native-like mastery of a second language and this limitation does not apply only to accent […] even the ability to distinguish between grammatical and ungrammatical sentences in a second language appears to be affected by the age factor" (Naiman et al*.,* 1996: 45). The main trend, then, sees young learners achieving better results also as concerns the accent, which can easily become a native-like accent.

Scholars have tried to explain such phenomena over the decades: various explanations have been proposed, but no agreement has been reached so far. On one hand there are scholars who support the hypothesis of the maturational factors effecting language learning, affirming that there is a "critical" period after which learning a foreign language proves more difficult than at earlier stages. Such period is perhaps around puberty, age at which the brain begins to lose plasticity. Griffiths (2008: 38-39) mentions Long's theory, according to which this loss of plasticity of adult learners is related to the so-called myelination: "[it] delineates learning pathways in the brain but reduces flexibility". However, others argue that "lateralization occurs much earlier, i.e., before the age of five (Krashen 1973) and that lateralization does not necessarily imply loss of

any abilities (Krashen 1975, 1981)" (Stern, 1983:362). According to Stern (1983) the ease of language learning in adults must have other reasons.

Ioup et al. (1994: 74) agree that there is not any "abrupt or absolute criterion after which L2 acquisition is impossible but rather a gradual process within which the ultimate level of L2 attainment becomes variable". The enhanced capacity of young learners would not be due to the age itself or to the cognitive capacities, but to the fact that adult learners rarely have access to the same quantity and quality of language input that children receive in play settings (Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Naiman et al. 1996).

In conclusion, in general terms there would appear to be a potential advantage for young learners of a second language. Despite this, there is no evidence which affirms the impossibility for adults to reach high proficiency in second language. (Singleton, 1989; Brown, 1994). Although younger beginners seem to accomplish their linguistic goals in an easier and quicker way, the ability of older learners to acquire a language is not denied and some evidence has even shown adult learners were able to reach a linguistic level similar to their L1 (Brown, 1994).

1.2.2 L1 transfer

Studies have shown that mother language patterns influence second language acquisition. The influence of the learners' L1 on the target language may lead to "the presence in the learner's performance in the target language of the mother-tongue- like features" (Corder, 1992: 19-20). When the speaker has not sufficient knowledge of the target language, indeed, s/he sometimes "borrows" from his/her mother language the items s/he lacks. This happens because, as Ellis (1997: 52) explains, "learners do not construct rules in a vacuum; rather they work with whatever information is at their disposal. This includes knowledge of their L1".

Some of the very first reflections on the mother language influence on language learning were made as early as 1917 by Palmer, who noticed that "the resemblances between two cognate languages constitute both a facility and a source of danger". Palmer anticipated what was later called "positive/negative transfer" (Ellis, 1997). As Palmer clarified in his work, when a learner studies a language that resembles his/her mother language's structure, morphology or form, he/she tends to convert each word into his/her mother language equivalent, maybe a word which is equivalent at sight. When, on the

contrary, two languages are different from one another, the student is pushed to analyse words more carefully and is not tempted to operate a mechanical conversion. On the contrary, the young learner may be "yet unable to establish any bilingual equations". In his view, young learners are not aware enough of their mother language structures; for this reason, they would tend not to create parallels between languages and tend to make fewer errors caused by language interference. For this reason, Palmer estimates the "factor of ignorance or the undeveloped powers of analogy" as "precious" and the adults' faculties of reasoning as handicapping (Palmer, 1917: 49).

Because of the possible association with the mother language, the adult learner might "create artificial and un-English sentences" (Palmer, 1917: 58). When this happens, so when the L1 transfer leads to uncorrectness, it is called negative. Another example of negative trasfer is the overuse of some forms: Chinese people, for instance, have the tendency to overuse regret expressions when they apologize in English, because they follow the mother language model. However, linguistic transfer is not always negative; on the contrary (as said above) it can be a facility: in this case it is called positive transfer (Ellis, 1997). So tranfer can be also positive and many errors are not due to the first language interference. Lightbown & Spada (1993: 56), for example, talk about errors derived from «*overgeneralization*» (when a grammar rule is ovegeneralised and wrongly applied) or due to «*simplification*» of sentences or grammar rules.

To sum up, prior knowledge of a language can be in some cases an advantage, because learners have an idea of how languages work: in this case the L1 transfer is called positive transfer. In other cases, prior L1 knowledge can lead learners to make incorrect guesses about second language functioning, errors that a native speaker would not make: hence the name negative transfer. However, regardless of the fact that trasfer is positive or negative, it must be with no doubt located among SLA influencing factors. The following section will handle the influence on language learning (either positive or negative influence) deriving from some factors which are not linguistic: the socio-affective factors (section 1.2.3) and personality and attitude (section 1.2.4)

1.2.3 Socio-affective factors

Adult and young learners react differently to what Griffiths (2008) calls "socio-affective" factors. Socio-affective factors are so-called because they refer to the influence of society

on the individual. Their main component, indeed, is social pressure. Both social pressure and its opposite social distance can have negative effects on the individual, generating anxiety and disorientation. However, peer pressure may have positive effects on learners, who are pushed to increase their linguistic skills in order to be integrated as quickly as possible in the peer group. Tendentially, young learners are more motivated than adult learners, since the latter have more fear of being judged or rejected by the community.

1.2.4 Personality and attitude

Another common belief is that personality affects language learning. The learners' characteristics are considered a factor to take into account: usually there is the tendency to believe that more extrovert people obtain better results. However, some studies show that this is not always true. In other words, the studies do not prove a clear and fixed relationship between personality and second language acquisition. Personality may affect the communicative competence, since those more extrovert students are more talkative, but this does not mean that they are always accurate and always respect grammatical rules (Lightbown & Spada, 1993).

Another factor to take into account is the learners' language attitude, i.e. "their natural disposition for learning an L2" (Ellis,1997: 6). After Carroll, Ellis (1997: 74) listed four different kinds of language attitude:

- phonemic coding ability: the capacity to easily identify the sounds of a foreign language;
- grammatical sensitivity: the ability to recognize the words' functions in sentences;
- inductive language ability: the capacity to recognize the correspondences between forms and meanings;
- rote learning ability: the ability to learn vocabulary easily.

These are the four types of language attitude, characteristics of certain learners, who could be naturally advantaged in foreign language learning. However, as Ellis (1997: 74) himself notes, although such theorization is quite interesting, "it remains speculative". However, taking into account their own personality and attitude and according to their preferences, learners could employ learning strategies to enhance their own strengths and overcome (or at least mitigate) their weaknesses. The language learning strategies field

will be discussed in greater depth in the following chapters, along with reflections on learning styles (section 3.2), SBI[8] (section 2.4.3) and strategy training (section 3.2).

1.2.5 Need

Many scholars noticed that a foreign language is better learned in the place where it is spoken. What makes the difference between the foreign language classroom and the foreign country is not only the difference in the quantity and quality of input exposure, but also the need to employ the local language to "survive". As Cooper (1973: 313) notes, "if we want a student to use English, then we must put him in situations which demand the use of English". In case of difficulty, in class it is so easy to switch to the mother language; abroad, in a conversation with a speaker who has no knowledge of the learner's own mother language, the learner is "forced" to use the target language because of the need to communicate. This need, this urge to communicate in the target language, to be understood by other L2 speakers and to "survive" is highly motivating: it is actually at the basis of what Gardner & Lambert (1972) defined *instrumental* motivation. Let us now examine the concept of motivation more closely.

1.2.6 Motivation

One factor which influences second language learning is in fact motivation. Ushioda (2008: 19) explains that the term motivation comes from the latin *movere,* which means to move. "Motivation concerns what moves a person to make certain choices, to engage in action, and to persist in action […] without motivation success will be hard to come by". One of the first to talk about the importance of motivation in language learning was Palmer, who in 1917 talked about an "incentive", i.e. the main reason why the student decides to start learning a new language, "the mainspring of his mechanism of study". (Palmer; 1917: 56). Later studies showed how important it is to be motivated in order to reach linguistic goals and to manage to master a language. Learning a new language may be very difficult and may require real efforts. For this reason, the learner must be accompanied by motivation, or otherwise the efforts might appear impossible to overcome. Only in a few cases do people study a language because of its nature; in the

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[8] Strategy Based Instruction

majority of the cases, indeed, the basic motivation is due to a future reward. Each learner is driven by motivation, however big or small, and there must be an aim, a goal, a reason. The learner must also modulate his/her study in order to better reach the aim in question.

Many scholars have stressed the key-role played by this factor and devoted studies to this issue, some have even distinguished between many kinds of motivation. For instance, Gardner and Lambert (1972) distinguish between *instrumental* and *integrated* motivation: instrumental motivation comes from the desire of learning a language because of its practical value; integrated motivation comes from the need to be part of a group in the target society. Ellis (1997) classifies four motivational types: *instrumental, integrative, intrinsic, and resultative*. Instrumental and integrative motivation resemble Gardner and Lambert's classification. *Intrinsic* motivation occurs when the learner is intrinsically curious and has a particular interest towards the language. *Resultative* motivation is so called because motivation is actually the result of learning, in particular of successful learning. Those who are deeply motivated, obtain as consequence great success. Sharing Shekan's doubts on the issue, Lightbown & Spada (1993: 112) also wonder if it is motivation which leads to achieve good results or if, on the contrary, success in language learning enhances motivation. This issue is so far not clear. In the end, they describe such relationship as a circular cause effect one: "the more one succeeds, the grater one's motivation; the greater one's motivation, the more one succeeds".

Going back to the categories of motivation, Ryan and Deci (2000), distinguish between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivation. The former kind of motivation involves doing something because of the enjoyment that derives from it. If something is satisfying, engaging, involving and brings pleasure, then the speaker is intrinsically motivated. Extrinsic motivation is so called because it is raised by a specific goal in mind: for example, gaining a qualification, getting a job, academic success. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation will lead to success when they are self-determined; on the contrary, when extrinsic motivation is either externally imposed or regulated by others, then it will not result in long-lasting benefits (Deci & Flaste , 1996). Motivation is maybe the most influential factor in language learning. It is not static, but rather dynamic in nature and can be easily lost (Ellis, 1997). Therefore, the learner must always keep his/her reason in mind and never forget it, or otherwise it may prove impossible to make further progresses.

Because of the importance of this topic in the field of SLA, it will be discussed in detail in both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

1.3 Second language teaching (SLT) approaches and methods

Since motivation is dynamic in nature and can be easily lost, learners have to work hard to keep it alive. Learners are the main protagonists of their own learning paths. The teaching process is in fact made up of three main components, which are: the learner, the teacher and the subject, as Pichiassi (1999) stresses. The order of components is not random, but intentional: the author mentions the learner first, while the teacher is mentioned after. This is because the teacher is no longer at the centre of the teaching/learning process but has left this place to the learner. In recent years there has been a decisive change in the teacher-centered model, which is now becoming a learner-centered one. The latter takes into account the learner's needs and learning processes and stimulates the learner's learning autonomy and self-organization. The teacher becomes a guide for the learner, who is required to be more responsible for his/her own learning. For this reason, a good teacher must not only have a deep knowledge of the subject taught but must also know how to deal with the learners and find together the most proficient way of learning.

This is particularly true for foreign language teaching. A native speaker is not necessarily a good teacher of the language s/he natively speaks. The foreign language teaching field has been widely studied and those who want to become learning teachers require education to do so. The science that studies the foreign language teaching field is the foreign language pedagogy. It is a relative new science and its success comes from the increasing importance given to foreign language education. Today, in our globalized world, it is important to know foreign languages, especially at an academic level. The interest in foreign languages and on their teaching is growing more and more. Hence the need for a science that investigates the principle at the basis of the foreign language teaching process and that satisfies the learners' needs. In the following sections an overview of the first learner-centered models will be provided, together with an analysis of the changing role of both teacher and learner.

1.3.1 'Approach' vs 'method'

First of all, I think it is necessary to clarify what respectively *approach* and *method* mean. An approach is a theoretical abstract ideology, while a method is its practical realization. Therefore, the approach is the theory that lies at the basis of the methodological practice. (Freddi,1987; Piva, 2000). I think that the figure provided by Balboni (2013: 5) is exemplificative. Here I report the English translation of the scheme.

Foreign language teaching research frame

Reference theories   Didactic methodology

World of ideas ⇨ Approach   Method ⇦ Action's world
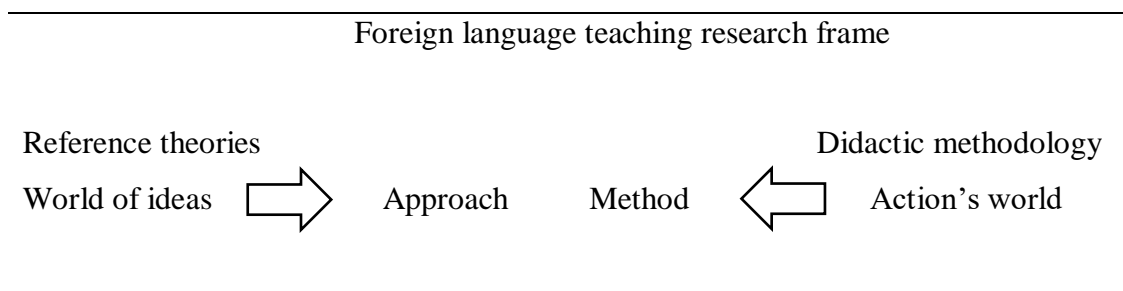
Figure 3- Foreign language teaching frame
adapted from Balboni (2013: 5)

As indicated in Figure 3, the approach belongs to the world of theories and ideas, while the method has to do with the world of actions: the first being abstract, the second being concrete. They are both essential elements of the foreign language teaching field. (Piva, 2000; Balboni, 2013).

Over the centuries, several categorizations of approaches and methods have been made.

> A quick glance at development of language teaching method demonstrates that the trends have […] been subjected to a pendulum-like evolution, swing from one extreme of the methodological spectrum to the other, always reproposed under a different name. *(Colella, 1999: 33).*

It is clear how, even if proposed under different names, the ground ideas at the basis of the trends were actually the same, only with a different label. Roughly speaking, the greatest dichotomy is the opposition between direct and indirect methods. Direct methods are those based on direct exposition of the student to the foreign language, firmly believing that foreign language learning occurs in the same way of the first language acquisition, it means through language exposition and through imitation of linguistic patterns. The direct methods are often deductive and based on the assumption that grammar rules can be deductively learned departing from their use. On the contrary,

indirect methods are mainly inductive and grammar- based. It means that the students have to learn grammar rules before being exposed to the foreign language. Grammar rules are learned following a scale of difficulty, departing from the easiest rules to arrive to the most difficult ones. These are the main traits that the various methods adopted in the Ancient Era, in the Middle Ages, in the Renaissance and in the Modern Age in the have in common (Colella, 1999; Pichiassi, 1999).

In the Contemporary Age, an epochal change occurred: new light shed respectively on the learner, on the teacher, on written or oral aspects of language learning, on learning devices and tools. It is beyond the scope of this work to consider all teaching methods and approaches: I will focus, indeed, only on those based on the learner-centered model, like the humanistic approach (see following section 1.3.2) and the communicative approach (see section 1.3.3).

1.3.2 The humanistic approach

> The notion of humanism dates back to the early Greeks who presented the idea of human being and set out principles for his behaviour as an individual and in a group […]. Figures such as Erasmus, Aquinas, Comenius, Locke and Rousseau were all influenced by Aristotle, whose educational goal was to develop man's highest capacities (Colella, 1999: 38).

The humanistic approach is so called because of its emphasis on the human being and because its main aim "is to develop the potentials- all the potentials- of man as a whole". How? "[…] the essential method for achieving this is the providing of good human relationship between the teacher and the student" (Patterson, 1973: 44).

In other words, the humanistic approach suggests a reformulation and reconsideration of the relationship among the participants in the second language learning process. This approach is based on the assumption that before being teacher/student/fellow students, they are human beings and for this reason their relationship is a key-element in the learning process. In comparison to other approaches, the humanistic one is more sensitive to the learner-teacher relationship due to its unique emphasis on learner autonomy and affective factors. In such a perspective, the success or failure of the language learning relies to a large extent to the learner-teacher relationship, not to the single individual. As consequence, the humanistic approach goals are "to develop positive thinking, to increase self-understanding, to build greater closeness among students, and to discover the strengths and goodness in oneself and one's classmates" (Moskowitz, 1982: 40).

The "common denominator" of the humanistic methods is that "they all attempt to find pedagogical avenues capable of minimizing psycho-affective resistance to L2 learning and acquisition. This was accomplished by concentrating on the needs, affective aspect and personality of the individual learner (Colella, 1999: 86). The humanistic approach integrates several methods, such as the Natural Approach, the Community Language Learning, the Total Physical Response, which will presented in the following chapters.

1.3.2.1 Natural Approach

Like the promoters of the communicative approach (such as van Ek and Wilkins), who complained about the excessive study of grammar and the little attention paid to the proper use of language in context (see section 1.3.5), Terrel also noticed that at school very little time was devoted to the development of communicative competence. On the contrary, time in class was spent on grammar exercises and pronunciation. For this reason, the Spanish teacher, in collaboration with Stephen Krashen -an applied linguist at the University of Southern California- proposed in 1977 the Natural Approach. Krashen formulated the theoretical assumptions on which the approach was based, while Terrel prepared the material to use in class. Terrel so explained his choice of the definition 'natural': "I have used the adjective 'natural', since most of the support for the suggestion I will make stems from observations and studies of second language acquisition in natural, i.e., non-academic, context" (Terrel, 1982: 160).

1.3.2.2 Community Language Learning (CLL)

Later called Community Counseling, it was proposed by C.A. Curran in 1976. It is based on the assumption that the relationship between teacher and student should resemble that between counsellor and client (hence the name *counseling*). The teacher's role is that of giving the students advice on how to better build their dialogues and encourages the interaction among students: this moment is called *security*. The other moments of the class are named: *expression, attention, reflection, retention, discrimination.* In a typical CLL class students sit in a circle while the counsellor (the teacher) remains outside of it. When a student wants to say something, the teacher translates the sentence into the foreign language; then the student repeats the translated sentence until he/she is ready to

record it. Each utterance is taped and transcribed. When the record is complete, the students listen to it, read the transcript and add their comments. The following step is writing the dialogue on the blackboard. Each student is then asked to repeat the translation of his/her sentence and to reflect on the language.

With this method students feel secure and the relation with the teacher (the *counsellor*) is a non-conflict one. Advantages are evident: this context blocks anxiety and stress and generates a relaxed environment; students are not competitors but co-operators and there is no fear of making mistakes in front of the class, because the teacher suggests the translation in the foreign language and students just have to repeat it. However, the possible negative effect is that students become too dependent on the teacher (Piva, 2000).

1.3.2.3 Total Physical Response (TPR)

This was developed by James J. Asher in 1979. It is so called because the body of the learner is involved into the learning process. The learner, indeed, is asked to integrate verbal responses with physical actions. At the basis of this approach lies the firm conviction of the importance of total body experiences during the learning process. Like babies at the very first stages of language acquisition answer to their parents with body movements and facial expressions, in the same way also the learner should respond physically to the teacher instruction, according to Asher's conception. Therefore, TPR practice consists in an initial phase during which the learner absorbs input from the teacher without verbally answering. In this way the student joins the conversation and uses the foreign language only when he/she feels like he/she is ready to do so; otherwise the teacher will not make any pressure nor constriction to speak or write in L2. By consequence, the learner's production will be spontaneous and intentional. The environment in class must be calm and confidential and must inspire serenity. This happens because these approaches fully consider the influence of learner's sensibility and emotions over the learning process.

Asher elaborated this method for three main reasons:

- he wanted to emulate the children's learning processes;

- because studies showed that physical movements helped memorization;

- he wanted to lessen stress and anxiety, which in most cases are an obstacle for the learning process (what Krashen calls "affective filter").

To lessen the stress, it is useful to adopt funny methods which cause serenity and relaxedness. It is not surprising that this method paid attention mainly to the oral language rather than written. The activities developed in class are based on the use of *imperative drills* with which the student is asked to perform something, individually or all together. In a TPR class the teacher gives commands in the target language and performs the task together with the learner; commands are repeated several times and the teacher performs them until the student/s manage/s to carry out them alone. However, it may be difficult to involve adults were difficult to involve in the physical response (Piva, 2000).

1.3.2.4 Silent Way

This is a method elaborated in 1963 by Caleb Gottegno. The method was called the *Silent Way* because the teacher remains silent for 90% of the lesson and sometimes the students remain silent as well, carefully listening to a record and thinking about it. No aids, no questions, no corrections from the teacher, who just observes the students and intervenes only when strictly necessary. The environment is therefore still, calm and not competitive; students do not experience stress, anxiety, nor pressure. Students speak in the foreign language employing the words suggested in a table chart. The teacher does not speak but indicates the words in the table chart with a stick made of wood.

It is not surprising that this method was criticized, because many scholars judged the silent environment too intimidatory and the continuous silent unbearable. Even if most people could consider this method *sui generis,* it highlighted not only the importance of giving students a certain degree of autonomy and responsibility, but also the need to respect each student's learning rhythm and time. The underlying philosophy is that "students should have more independence, autonomy, and responsibility in learning and should develop their own criteria towards a self-correction" (Larsen-Freeman, 1986: 62).

1.3.3 The communicative approach

Using Stern's words, in the 1970s some scholars "used their own judgment and initiative in giving language pedagogy the linguistic direction they regarded as necessary […] they welcomed the shift of interest in linguistic theory towards discourse analysis, semantics, speech act theory, sociolinguistics and pragmatics" (Stern, 1983: 177). This period registers a tendency towards the analytic approach to communication; this approach

handles communication through the study of speech acts, sociolinguistic issues, language functions: in other words, it operates a functional analysis of the language (Stern, 1992).

Because of the analytic approach to communication, scholars promoted the so called communicative approach, thanks to which a fundamental change in the language pedagogy occurred. At first they did not actually have second language pedagogy in mind, but their aim was only that of analysing the intuitive language command of native speakers, identifying such ability as "communicative competence". Later, this issue was set as second language learning goal.

> In 1970s a much richer conceptualization of language began to emerge. Language was seen as a system for the expression of meaning, and linguists began to analyse language as a system for the expression of meanings, rather than as a system of abstract syntactic rules (Nunan, 2013: 51).

Since every student's need is that of communicating, the new approach considers linguistic knowledge as a tool to achieve this aim. The main aim of this approach is in fact to achieve communicative proficiency and accuracy: it is based on the belief that "language learning comes about when the teacher gets learners to use the language pragmatically to mediate meaning for a purpose" (Widdowson, 1990: 160).

According to Hymes (1979: 15) there are several sectors of communicative competence, and the grammatical sector is only one of them. He also affirms that "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" and that "rules of speech acts enter as controlling factor for linguistic form as a whole". This means that, despite the fact that the knowledge of grammar rules is a fundamental requirement in language learning, it is only one of the several aspects that must be taken into account while learning a language. "Language *without* grammar would certainly leave us seriously handicapped […] language without grammar would be chaotic: countless words without the indispensable guidelines for how they can be ordered and modified" (Batstone, 1994: 3-4). However, "grammatical competence remains in a perpetual state of potentiality unless it is realized in communication" (Widdowson, 1979a: 50). In other words, without the communicating ability the mere grammar knowledge is useless and cannot fulfill the speaker's communicative needs. As also Johnson argued (sharing Newmark's insight) "being appropriate" is something different from "being structurally correct" (Johnson, 1979: 192). Following this line of thought, if a sentence looks grammatically correct, but it is not appropriate to the context in which is it uttered, then

it will do not convey the desired meaning and communication will fail. There is no doubt that learning a language means not only "acquiring the ability to compose correct sentences […] but also involves acquiring an understanding of which sentences, or parts of sentences are appropriate in a particualar context"; being able to use it to "achieve some kind of communicative purposes" (Widdowson,1978: 2-3).

To this extent it is necessary to recall Widdowson's distinction between the concept of *use* and *usage*. As he himself admits, such distinction does not indicate a brand new theorisation, but rather resembles the Saussurian dicothomy between *langue* and *parole* and the distinction between competence and performance as formulated by Chomsky. Widdowson's definition of usage, Saussure's langue and Chomsky's competence, they all refer to grammatical competence, i.e. "the mastery of the principles governing language behaviour", in other words "what a person knows about a language" (Nunan, 2013: 24); on the contrary, the terms use/*parole*/performance are related to the communicative competence, i.e. "the manifestation of these internalised rules in actual language use" (Nunan, 2013: 24). Lanuguage rules are called "internalized" because native speakers know them implicitly even if they are sometimes not able to verbalize them explicitly (Diller, 1979). Therefore a sentence fulfils its communicative scope not only when its usage is correct, but also when its use is appropriate. "Knowledge of usage […] is of little utility on its own: it has to be complemented by a knowledge of appropriate use" (Widdowson, 1978: 18).

This is a vision also shared by Wilkins, who argues the "insufficiency of purely grammatical approaches to language teaching" (Wilkins, 1979b: 91). The communicative approach, then, aims at learners acquiring true communicative competence, at learning how to efficiently "use" the language to fulfil ones' communicative purposes. "The new emphasis on meaning, texts, speech functions, and so on is not only exciting, it is also closer to the living reality of language in use" (Stern, 1992: 162).

The focus on the need to learning how to use a language, the need to acquire skills rather than mere linguistic knowledge, and to able to deal with specific situations and carry out specific activities, led to the development of a kind of "competency-based education" (CBE) (Nunan, 2013).

A proficiency-oriented language curriculum is not one which sets out to teach learners linguistic communicative competence, since these are merely abstractions or idealisations; rather, it is organised

around the particular kind of communicative tasks the learners need to master and the skills and behaviours needed to accomplish them (Richards, 1985: 5).

So, curricula were organised into tasks which enabled students to learn how to use a language. Littlewood proposed the so called "weak version" of the communicative language teaching, a version which involves not only grammar notions, considered fundamental in a language course, but also the communicative view of language teaching (Littlewood, 1981). The functional-notional approach as well was elaborated to cope with this need.

1.3.3.1 The functional-notional approach and syllabus design

The need to facilitate foreign language learning and to find new methods to improve students' proficiency became an issue for the Council of Europe. For this reason, the Council of Europe entrusted a group of experts with a program to address adult European learners. The project was entitled the "Modern Language Project" and its aim was providing adults with a path to follow to reach their linguistic goals and to help them to carry out specific linguistic activities, such as: economic, business, tourist and even recreational activities (Nunan, 2013). The group of experts employed the functional-notional syllabus, based on the assumption that the learner must have something to say (*notion*) and a linguistic scope (*communicative function*) (Pichiassi, 1999).

First of all let us define what a syllabys is: it is a "selection and grading of content"; "a specification of what is to be taught in a language programme and the order in which it is to be taught" (Nunan, 1988: 6; 159). "The syllabus is […] seen as an instrument by which the teacher, with the help of the syllabus designer, can achieve a degree of 'fit' between the needs and aims of the learner (as social being and individual) and the activities which will take place in the classroom" (Yalden, 1984: 14).

Having realised the "insufficiency of purely grammatical approaches to language teaching", Wilkins (1979b: 91), together with Van Ek and others retained it necessary to propose the notional syllabus in substitution of the traditional grammatical syllabus. The difference between them is that the notional syllabus poses the attention not on the elements of syntax and lexis per se, but on the concepts they express and on the functions that they realize. "Wilkins groups these concepts and functions under the general heading of 'notion'" (Widdowson, 1979b: 253).

The syllabus proposed by Wilkins was made up of three categories:

1) semantical-grammatical categories, such as time, quantity, space, relations and deixis;

2) categories of modal meaning, such as certainty (for example probability, doubt), commitment (intention, obligation);

3) categories of communicative functions, linked to the speech acts theory.

Thanks to the formulation of the new syllabi, language classes are based on the simulation of possible circumstances that may occur in the daily routine of common daily situation. Learners are more involved and engaged in language classes: they are asked for active participation, to join simulations and improvisations, during which everyday situations are presented, so that students learn to interact to each other in a given context (Stern, 1992).

Similarly, also van Ek elaborated a syllabus: in his *Threshold Level English,* van Ek listed the necessary elements to take into account while arranging a language syllabus. Among these there are: the topic the students will have to deal with; the language functions to fulfil; the notions to handle; the language forms to use (Nunan, 1988). The document addressed those responsible for the planning of foreign language courses, an inventory of linguistic functions and notions, necessary for the communication to occur and fundamental to satisfy the learners' linguistic needs. Thanks to this syllabus, grammar patterns continued to be taught, but they "are matched to particular communicative meanings so that learners can see the connection between form and function". In other words, learners "learn how to use grammar to express different communicative meanings" (Nunan, 2013: 71). The new syllabi are not developed on the basis of grammatical, phonological and lexical items to be taught, but considering the learners' linguistic needs. This it means considering the circumstances in which learners will need to use the foreign language (Nunan, 2013). The practical implementation of such learning is achieved through a number of activities, such as group projects, group presentations, classroom workshops, role plays and debates. Group work, indeed, teaches students how to work in a team and enables them to develop problem-solving skills to employ in every possible field (Attard, Di Iorio, Geven, & Santa, 2010).

1.3.3.2 Common European Framework of Reference

The term Threshold Level indicated not only a syllabus, but also the minimum level necessary to "survive" in a foreign land and to establish relationships with native speakers. It includes a ground vocabulary, with the most frequent words of daily use. Without this basis it is impossible to reach higher levels of linguistic knowledge.

Language ability, indeed, is described in an international document called the Common European Framework Reference for Languages (CEFR). The framework grades linguistic proficiency on a six-level scale (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2)[9] where: levels A indicate the language use typical of beginners; levels B indicate independent language use; levels C indicate high language proficiency.
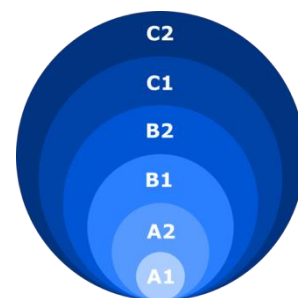
Figure 4- CEFR levels
Source: www.coe.it

The CEFR levels are assumed to be "logical steps": the learning path is gradual and linear, and each learner has to follow the linear route A1-A2-B1-B2-C1-C2; it is not possible to skip a step. What is more, success in language learning is unpredictable and impossible to forecast; if the language is not practised, it is possible to step backwards to the previous level. "Language development may fluctuate between periods of strong growth and periods of strong decline" (Lowie, 2012: 21). In other words, it is possible not only to make progresses, but also to regress, because language proficiency does not grow "in a steady line from A1 to C2" (Lowie, 2012: 23).

The framework of reference developed by the Council of Europe provides learners with means for language self-assessment.

> In the past decade the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001) has […] brought us an action-oriented approach to language proficiency […] [which] entails a practical characteristic that enables learners to monitor their progress in language proficiency (Lowie, 2012: 17-18).

In other words, the framework results a means that can be exploited not only by teachers to judge their students, but also by students for self-evaluation. Figure 5 represents the official description of the CEFR levels. Recently, another level has been added to the CEFR: a band of proficiency below A1 "at which the learner has not yet acquired a

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[9] https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions

generative capacity, but relies upon a repertoire of words and formulaic expressions"
called Pre-A1 (Council of Europe, 2018: 46).

PROFICIENT USER	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
INDEPENDENT USER	B2	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.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters 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.
BASIC USER	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Figure 5- CEFR Global Scale
Source: www.coe.it

In the framework of reference each level is accompanied by "Can do" descriptors, which promote a proficiency (rather than deficiency) perspective. Such descriptors, indeed, stress what learners are able to do at a certain linguistic level, not on what they cannot do. Educational aims and outcomes are therefore positively formulated at all levels. At the same time, the CEFR provides learners not only with the description of what they can do, but also of "what the users/learners need to be able *to do* in the language" (Council of Europe, 2018: 26). In a nutshell, CEFR's "Can do definition of aspects of proficiency provides a clear shared roadmap for learning" (Council of Europe, 2018: 25) thanks to its "transparency [and to its] clear reference points" (Council of Europe, 2018: 25). Learners can exploit such useful tool to have clear in mind which they goals should be in order to reach the wished level of language proficiency. As stated earlier, the CEFR facilitate the

shift towards the new learner-centered model, which will be discussed in the following section.

1.4 The educational contract and the new learner-centered model

The term "educational contract" indicates an agreement between teacher and learner. As Musello (2005) clarifies, it aims at establishing the learning goals together with the student: on the one hand the student makes the necessary efforts to reach these goals and the teacher provides him/her with the necessary tools and means to facilitate the process.

Musello (2005) recalls three different contracts that have existed in the course of the time:

♦ *teacher-/ adult-centered model*, centered on the figure of the teacher, seen as vehicle of knowledge, experience and skills;

♦ *child-centered model*, centered on the figure of the child/learner, seen as "pure subject, not corrupted by society and experiences" and addressee of the pedagogical project;

♦ *relational and interpersonal model* (model of mutual agreement), not centered on the single subject, but rather on their relationship, the agreement and the communication between them.

The comparison is useful for a better understanding of the key issues and differences between models. The first model is based on the traditional pyramid hierarchy, with the teacher at the top of and the learner at its bottom. In the second model, the authority of the teacher is mitigated by the activism of the learner. The advantage is that students are more stimulated and engaged, but there are risks, too: for example, there is the risk of giving students to much "freedom" and the risk of completely losing the control of the lesson. For this reason, the most suitable model appears to be the third one, more balanced than the other and based on the mutual agreement between the two parts.

Similarly, Nunan (2013) provides a contrastive analysis of the traditional and contemporary model: the traditional hierarchical model and the new learner-centered one, shedding light on the differences between them. Nunan analyses nine features, comparing how each model realizes them. These are: syllabus design; approach to teaching; role of learners; approach to language; using language texts; resources for learning, approach to learning, classroom organisation, assessment (see Table 1).

	Traditional	*Contemporary*
		In addition to the features stout in the left-hand column…
Syllabus design	Content and methodology decided with reference to the classroom rather than with reference to learner's real communicative needs.	Content and methodology match learner needs beyond the classroom.
Approach to teaching (methodology)	Learners are taught about language and its rules, learning facts about language rather than how to use it communicatively.	Learners are actively involved in using language
Role of learners	Learners spend their time copying and reproducing language written down by others.	Learners learn how to use language creatively, responding in novel and authentic communicative situations.
Approach to language	Grammar is taught as rules to be memorized.	Grammar and vocabulary are taught communicatively so learners can use the grammar to express different communicative meanings.
Using language texts	Learners listen and read specially written classroom texts. They have difficulty dealing with authentic texts outside the classroom.	Learners study authentic texts and learn to use genuine language outside the classroom
Resources for learning	Learning have to rely only on the textbooks as an aid to language learning.	Learners use specially written, well-illustrated textbooks plus self-study workbooks, cassette tapes and videotaped materials.
Approach to learning	Learners don't learn how to become better language learners on their own.	Learners work in small groups and pairs, learning skills of cooperating with others and how to express their own learning outside the classroom.
Classroom organisation	Learners sit in rows facing the teacher and spend most of their time repeating what the teachers says. They don't learn how to express their own ideas.	Learners work in small groups and pairs, learning skills of cooperating with others and how to express their own opinions, ideas and feelings.
Assessment	Teacher alone assesses the student's progress. Learners do not develop ability to assess what they have learned	Learning trained to assess their own learning process, and can identify their own strengths and weaknesses.

Table 1- The traditional and the contemporary in language education
Source: Nunan (2013: 78-79).

This new scenario involves a shift in perspective: the model sheds new light on one hand on the student's cognitive abilities, on the other hand on the organization of learning contexts and redefinition of the teacher's skills and function. Teachers are not considered as a mere "knowledge dispenser" but as facilitators of the learning process and mediators, who build bridges between the learner and the object of the learning desire. The teacher should provide useful tools to achieve the learning goals. In the past, the student was supposed to "obey" the teacher, and not seen as a person to negotiate with. The teacher's instructions had to be followed without questioning. According to the tradition, the approach was pyramidal, and the professor was seen as "a sage who imparts universal truths" (Emes & Cleveland-Innes, 2003: 50). According to the new paradigm, instead, "there is not one single truth but […] knowledge is socially constructed" (Emes & Cleveland-Innes, 2003: 50). Such perspective prefers a multiple view rather than a single one. The new concept of the educational contract suggests, indeed, that the teacher should become facilitators and their role is "to create optimal conditions for learning to take place" (Lowie, 2012: 31-32).

Musello (2005) quotes the UNESCO *International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century,* according to which among the fundamental cornerstones of the new millennium pedagogy there are "learning to learn" and "learning to know". This new approach to the learning process is not narrow and particular, but general and global and its final aims are the autonomy and self-regulation. The students should not deny themselves and be obliged to fit into the standard format, but, on the contrary, methods must match their individual features. The student is no longer an object to educate, subject to the teacher, but a more and more autonomous learner, protagonist of his/her own learning path and responsible for it. That of autonomy in learning is a key concept[10], fundamental to understand the shift in perspective of this new epoch. The new approaches see the student, no longer as part of the school class, but as a learner independent from the group and with his/her own learning time and preferences. The typical class is not seen as a cohesive group of students, but as a heterogenous group of learners.

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[10]this concept will be handled in Chapter 2 in greater depth.

The shift from *student* to *learner* is essential because even the variation of the terminology is the result of a change in ideology. The word *student* is in fact intertwined with the figure of a teacher, without whom the learning process is impossible. In the new theorizations, the student has become a *learner*, who can autonomously learn, even without a teacher. The teacher has lost his/her essential place and now he/she does not lead the learning process, but rather facilitates it. The subject, indeed, is driven to think on his own and elaborate his own solutions to achieve his goals; moreover, the subject becomes able to evaluate his individual progresses and/or difficulties. In this way, the learner becomes an active subject, who self-regulates his/her own learning path, is able to recognize his abilities and skills and to solve his learning difficulties as well. Teachers and the students are on the same level and mutually responsible of the learning process, since (as above said), the learner becomes active and no more passive (Musello, 2005).

Emes & Cleveland-Innes (2003) argue that the role of the learner is institutionalized, which means it is now more relevant, since learners take part in the learning experience definition. In such a frame, the concept of "action research" arose: a group activity, collaborative in nature and change oriented (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Its aim is to change and improve what happens in the classrooms (Nunan, 2013). What is more, the relationship should be interactive: the two parts should work together on the most suitable learning options. Johnson (2009) describes the new interaction between learners, teachers and objects in the environment as a "dialogic mediation", which "has the potential to create opportunities for development because it arises in the specific social activities learners engage in, the resources they use to do so, and what is accomplished by engaging in those activities" (Johnson, 2009: 4). Interaction in foreign language learning is therefore fundamental.

Wertsch (1985) refers to the new teacher/learner interaction with the term 'strategic mediation'. In this relationship, the "support that teachers give to learners must be efficient, targeted, and goal-oriented so that learners develop an overall orientation toward the task or concept" (Johnson, 2009: 20).

Nunan (2013) sums up the steps of the action research cycle: the first step is the identification of the student difficulty met in the learning process: the problem must be investigated and a reason for it must be found. Suspicions about it are later confirmed through students' interviews. Once the problem is discerned, intervention can be planned

and then initiated. Later it is possible to check if interventions have worked or not. If not, the method must be changed again (Nunan, 2013). In order to reach a balance, methods which do not seem to work must be changed and modified in order to match the students' requirements. In addition, the teacher should also be willing to be constantly updated.

The curriculum is therefore "negotiated" with learners, for which Nunan (2013: 58-60) proposes nine steps (see Box 1).

1. Make instruction goals clear to learners;

2. Allow learners to create their own goals;

3. Encourage learners to use their second language outside the classroom;

4. Raise awareness of learning processes;

5. Help learners identify their own preferred styles and strategies;

6. Encourage learners' choice;

7. Allow learners to generate their own tasks;

8. Encourage learners to become teachers;

9. Encourage learners to become researchers.

Box 1- Steps for the curriculum co-construction.
Source: Nunan (2013: 58-60).

Changing is not always easy, not only for students but also for teachers: the new model gives students a great deal of responsibility and the student should be very motivated to become an autonomous learner. According to Lea et al. (2003: 322) the positive effects of the learner-centered model are as follows:

♦ the reliance on active rather than passive learning;

♦ an emphasis on deep learning and understanding;

♦ an increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student;

♦ an increased sense of autonomy in the learner;

♦ an interdependence between teacher and learner;

♦ mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship;

♦ a reflexive approach to the teaching and learning process on the part of both the teacher and the learner.

Box 2- Learner-centered model's potive effects.
Source: Lea et al. (2003: 322)

Also, the CEFR stresses the benefits of the new model: learners are more motivated, as they are also made more independent and responsible for their own learning experience; teachers, on the other hand, are more stimulated and share with the learner the burdens of syllabus and lessons' design. In general, there is a quality enhancement of the academic experience and better retention rates in higher education, since more students finish their studies (Attard et al., 2010).

In conclusion, at the basis of the new learner-centered model there is the personalization of the teaching method and the increase in learner autonomy. These contracts vary together with values and behaviours and are related to the pedagogical models. What is more, if in the past a single method was employed for a whole class, now it appears clear that methods should be chosen according to the group's nature, so that teachers have to adapt their method to the class and not the reverse.

The theoretical framework has definitely changed, and always new efforts are being made to put this theory in practice. Thanks to the new model, learners cooperate with teacher in setting establishing their learning goals and communicative aims: "the language learner is no longer seen as a consumer of teacher-directed courseware, but as a social agent in the interactive process of language learning" (Lowie, 2012: 17). Learners learn not only grammar rules, but also acquire communicative skills to employ in ordinary situations; learners are made autonomous and responsible for their own learning paths. Therefore, they develop certain soft skills (such as problem-solving skills) which can be extended to many other fields and contexts. The subject develops a *modus operandi* that might result useful to solve problems of different nature, not only within the academic context, but also in the working context and in life in general. The fundamental concept of the learner's autonomy will be further discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 2

The autonomous language learner and the use of learning strategies

In Chapter 1 I explored the shift in second language teaching from the pyramidal hierarchy, typical of the teacher-centered model to the flat hierarchy, of the learner-centered one. This change in the model brought about a role redefinition: the teacher is no longer a figure the learner must obey to, but becomes a guide, a facilitator who intervenes and helps the learner. The latter, on the other hand, becomes responsible for his/her own learning path: s/he cooperates with the teacher in the establishment of the learning goals and in the design of syllabus and class content. The lesson reflects the learner's linguistic needs and practical requirements: the learner acquires not only theoretical knowledge, but also practical skills to reach his/her goals autonomously. The idea of this approach, indeed, is to encourage learner's autonomy. Those who manage to reach autonomy in foreign language learning (or are autonomy-oriented) have been seen to be "good" language learners (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Cohen, 2007; Benson, 2013; Hamilton, 2013, Raya & Vieira, 2015). The literature suggests that good language learners are autonomous, motivated and make proficient use of learning strategies. These are rather debated issues and, on some topics related to autonomy, motivation and language learning strategies, scholars have not reached an agreement. In this chapter, the most significant literature related to the above-mentioned issues will be reviewed, departing from Rubin's (1975) debated contribution to the field of SLA.

2.1 The "good" language learner

The landmark article that initiated the whole "good language learner" debate was Joan Rubin's publication *What the 'Good Language Learner' can teach us*. "When Rubin published her article on good language learners in 1975, she probably did not expect that she would sow the seeds of a controversy which would still be unresolved more than 30 years later" (Griffiths, 2008: 1). At the time of publication, indeed, Joan Rubin had no

idea that her article would have start such an inquiry, which interested so wide a number of scholars and researchers.

In her article Rubin notices how relatively easy it is for a child to learn his/her mother tongue. Learning a native language is no doubt much easier than learning any other second language. This is a concept acknowledged by all the scholars interested in first language acquisition. Given such evidence, Rubin (1975: 41) wonders: "if all peoples can learn their first language easily and well (although some have more verbal skills than others), why does this innate ability seem to decline for some when second language learning is the task?". So, Rubin notices the huge difference of facility between learning a first language and learning a second language. There is also a difference within second language learning: some learn a second language more easily than others and achieve better results. In the first chapter I dealt with second language acquisition issues and reached the conclusion that in the long run children learn generally better than adults do (in a natural environment). This is maybe because of the quantity and quality of linguistic inputs to which s/he is exposed. However, there are some exceptions of successful adult learners as well and examples of language learners, who reach high levels even in a non-natural environment. Rubin calls such successful learners 'good' language learners. Generally speaking, according to Rubin (1975), the good language leaner:

♦ is a guesser: when s/he does not know a meaning, s/he does not give up, but rather looks for clues, which may lead to the meaning;

♦ s/he is not shy nor inhibited;

♦ s/he does not miss the opportunity of using/hearing the language;

♦ s/he circumvents the obstacles through the use of synonyms, circumlocutions or even gestures, in short, whatever knowledge available.

In short, what characterises good language learners is continual action: a good language learner never misses the chance to use the target language and, even when s/he has difficulty, s/he always find ways to overcome it. Similarly, Naiman et al. (1996: 39) underline that the behaviour of good language learner dynamics:

> the good language learner is someone who actively involves himself in the language learning process […] finds ways to overcome obstacles, whether linguistic, affective, or environmental; he monitors his own performance; he studies, practices, and involves himself in communication.

Another noteworthy quote comes from Wenden (1991: 15):

> 'Successful' or 'expert' or 'intelligent' learners have learned how to learn. They have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes than enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher. Therefore, they are autonomous.

In general, "it is what the learner *does* rather than what the language *is* which has remained central to the investigative efforts of LLS researchers" (Grenfell & Macaro, 2007: 26-27). However, being a successful language learner and overcoming obstacles of different nature is not easy. In order to do so, the learner must be driven by high motivation: "it almost goes without saying that good language learners are motivated" (Ushioda, 2008: 19). The literature, indeed, suggests that good language learners are autonomous, motivated and make proficient use of learning strategies.

> Good language learners are motivated and therefore invest considerable time and effort in their learning. They are autonomous and have positive beliefs about themselves and the target language. They frequently use and carefully orchestrate a large repertoire of language learning strategies chosen to suit their situation, their learning goals and their own individual characteristics (Griffiths, 2018: 57).

In a recent study, Griffiths (2018) surveyed fourteen learners of English, considered to be successful learners (all of them were either teaching English or teaching in English). They were asked to rate, among the others, their motivation, their autonomy and their learning strategies use. With only one exception, they all declared they were highly motivated; they declared they invested a great deal of time and effort in learning English (median rate 4.5 out of 5); also, they declared that they frequently used learning strategies (Griffiths: 2018: 69). Although this study provided a relatively small and selective example, it could make sense to expose language learners to learning strategies, in order to give them the chance to either use theme or not. After all, what characterises an autonomous learner is the freedom to choose how to regulate one's own learning path. Let us now look more closely at the concept of learning autonomy, while motivation and learning strategies will be discussed in section 2.3 and section 2.4 of this chapter respectively.

2.2 Autonomy in learning

The concept of learner autonomy was introduced by Henri Holec in his *Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning,* a report commissioned in 1971 by the Council of Europe in

the ambit of adults' permanent education. One of the project's outcomes was the establishment of the CRAPEL centre (Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en Langues) at the University of Nancy, whose founder, Châlon, is considered the father of autonomy in language learning. When he died, the CRAPEL's leadership passed to Henri Holec, who remains a prominent figure within the field so far (Benson, 2013). The concept of autonomy in learning was later expanded by David Little. In his work *Learner autonomy* (Little, 1991a), before providing a formal definition of autonomy in learning, first of all the author clarifies what autonomy is not. In this way old myths on the issue are exposed. Little's (1991a) 'non-definitions' are very interesting. Some of them are:

♦ autonomy is not always self-instruction;

♦ learners' autonomy is not threatened by teachers;

♦ autonomy has not any general rule to be developed but is rather individual.

First of all, autonomy must not be confused with self-instruction.

> Perhaps the most widespread misconception is that autonomy is synonymous with self-instruction; that it is essentially a matter of deciding to learn without a teacher […] for autonomy is not exclusively or even primarily a matter of how learning is organized (Little, 1991a: 2).

The mere decision to learn independently without the help and supervision of a teacher does not make the learner autonomous. It may have autonomy as consequence, but it is not always the case. In other words, learning does not take place in a vacuum and learning autonomously does not mean learning on one's own, in isolation from other learners (Pemberton, 1996). As Esch (2009) warns, there is the risk of confusing autonomy with self-determination and shifting towards self-centredness rather than to learner-centredness. Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that language learning is social in nature and entails not only the capacity and willingness to act independently, but in cooperation with others, since learners are first of all social beings (Little, 1991a; Little, 1991b; Kohonen, 1992; Dam, 1995; Esch, 2009; Benson, 2013). On the contrary, in language learning interaction is an "essential condition":

> in common usage the word "autonomy" denotes a significant measure of independence from the control of others. The concept of learner autonomy similarly implies that the learner enjoys a high degree of freedom. But […] because we are social beings our independence is always balanced by dependence; our essential condition is one of interdependence (Little, 1991a: 4-5).

In a nutshell, autonomy is not synonymous of isolation: in isolation from its environment and external context autonomy could not exist (Hamilton, 2013).

Another concept which Little (1991a) clarifies is the teacher's role. The teacher's help does not threaten the learner's autonomy and it does not efface the learner's efforts: the teacher must not be seen as a threat to learner autonomy. What is more, a teacher cannot make a learner autonomous: they are not directly responsible for their students' autonomy. They can encourage students, but if the latter fail, teachers are not responsible for such failures.

Yet there is not a single path towards autonomy, since such paths vary according to different variables, such as age, motivation and personal needs. That means that each learner can be autonomous in his/her personal way.

> Learner autonomy is not merely a matter of organization, does not entail an abdication of initiative and control on the part of the teacher, is not a teaching method, is not to be equated with a single easily identified behaviour, and is not a steady state attained by a happy band of privileged learners (Little, 1991a: 4).

Let us now turn to definitions. How can autonomy be defined? "Autonomy is a *capacity* - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (Little, 1991a: 4). It is characterised by "a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes" (Dam, 1995: 1). Therefore, autonomous learners have "clear, self-set, personal goals and relate their learning to these goals" (Wenden, 1999: 17). Sui generis is John Trim's (1976) depiction of autonomous learners, according to whom autonomous learners are similar to vertebrates who support themselves through structures which lie within them, rather than through external structures like crustaceans. What is more, in Trim's view (1976) autonomy is an adaptive ability because it allows learners to develop an internal structure which sustains their own learning. Such a vision is shared by Esch (1996), who reformulates Darwin's evolution theory, stating that humans are able to adapt to different learning conditions and to develop their learning abilities.

Considering the sizeable amount of explanations encountered while reviewing the huge literature on learning autonomy, another exhaustive definition of learning autonomy is that provided by Raya & Vieira (2015: 22), who define autonomy as the "competence to develop a self-determined socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation". They explain such a definition as follows.

competence	To govern oneself one must be in a position to act competently. Competence involves *attitudinal dispositions, knowledge,* and *abilities* to develop self-determination, social responsibility and critical awareness.
to develop	Autonomy is not an all or nothing concept, it is better conceived as a continuum in which different degrees of self-management can be exercised at different moments.
as a self-determined	Autonomy has an *individual dimension* (e.g. self-knowledge, responsible self-agency, self-regulation, self-direction).
socially responsible	Autonomy has a *social dimension* (e.g., voice, respect for others, negotiation, co-operation, interdependence)
and critically aware	Autonomy has a moral and political implications and involves the cultivation of an inquiring, independent mind.
participant	Autonomy involves assuming a *proactive* and *interactive* role.
in (and beyond) educational environments	Formal educational settings can and should allow individuals to exercise the right to develop autonomy, and thus promote lifelong learning, which may occur both within and outside of an educational institution.
within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation	Learner and teacher development towards autonomy assumes that education is a moral and political phenomenon whose goal is to transform (rather than produce) the *status quo*. In this sense, autonomy is a collective interest oriented by democratic and emancipatory ideals.

Figure 6- A definition of learner and teacher autonomy. Source: Raya & Vieira (2015: 22)

In this description, autonomy is described as a competence which allows learners to be able to shape their linguistic path independently. It is an individual dimension because it

involves the engagement of the learner him/herself, but at the same time it involves a social dimension, considered the social nature of learning. Autonomy, after all, does not only involve the learning environment, but it is a collective interest. In their definition Raya & Vieira (2015: 22) also affirm that "autonomy involves assuming a *proactive* and *interactive* role". This concept is also handled by Littlewood (1999: 75), who differentiates between *proactive* and *reactive* autonomy: the former is initiated by learners themselves, who regulate the direction of the activity; the latter is initiated by others, who set the activity's direction and select the content learners have to work with. The ultimate goal is that of reaching proactive autonomy.

However, becoming an autonomous good language learner is not an immediate and sudden process, but rather gradual: the learning process itself "starts out as 'other-regulation' (regulation by another person) but, through a series of dialogues with more capable people, becomes self-regulation" (Oxford & Schramm: 2007: 53). "Autonomous language learners […] are in some sense 'in control' of important dimensions of their learning, which might otherwise be controlled by others or by nobody at all" (Benson, 2010: 79). Teachers can help students in their path towards learning autonomy. Noteworthy examples are provided by Nunan (1996: 20):

- Autonomy is enhanced when learners are actively involved in productive use of the target language, rather than merely reproducing language models provided by the teacher or the textbook.
- Autonomy is enhanced when learners are given opportunities to select content al learning tasks and also when they are provided with opportunities to evaluate their own progress.
- Autonomy is enhanced when learners are encouraged to self-monitor and self-assess.

If learners reach such a degree of involvement, exploit all the available opportunities and develop the skills necessary to self-monitor and self-evaluate their own learning path, then it can be stated that they have reached a high degree of autonomy. An autonomous learner, indeed, "is capable of authentic or meaningful engagement with his learning environment […] and makes the most of the resources available therein" (Raya & Vieira, 2015: 110). A student who, in the end, manages to "take control of the 'what, when, and how' of language learning and learn successfully" (Cohen, 2007: 40), is surely an autonomous "good" language learner. After all, "learning how to learn and self-regulation appear to play a decisive role in the development of learner autonomy" (Raya & Vieira, 2015: 28). One way to enhance learning autonomy is by adopting language learning strategies. These will be discussed in section 2.4. Yet why should autonomous learning

be enhanced? The answer is simple: because autonomous learners are better language learners (Benson, 2013; Hamilton, 2013), as their learning is more effective (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989). After all, "we learn better when we are in charge of our own learning because of cognitive, social and affective aspects involved in the learning process" (Ciekanski, 2007: 112). For this reason autonomy should be a learning goal (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Benson, 2013; Hamilton, 2013).

Nevertheless, not every student is able to carry such a burden and some refuse to be autonomous: they would rather just follow the teachers' instructions and to do only what is strictly necessary to have sufficient marks. "We should not, of course, be surprised if some learners are resistant to the idea of autonomy. After all, autonomy implies a readiness to subject our certainties to continuous challenge, and that can be very unsettling" (Little, 1991a: 48). In other words, if results do not satisfy our expectancies, this could be really frustrating and demotivating. Only those who show perseverance can hope to obtain satisfying results. What make learners persevere is with no doubt their strong motivation. Indeed, good language learners are not necessarily those to whom a language comes very easily; yet they have persevered, have overcome frustration, and have, after many trials and errors, achieved a satisfactory level of achievement (Stern, 1983: 380). The study of the causes of language learning failure is often related to demotivation issues (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013).

Motivational issues will be further discussed in section 2.3. Before focusing on them, let us devote a few words to autonomy enhancement through the use of online resources. Through online resources, indeed, learners may be helped to shape their learning path and decide in autonomy when and what they want to learn.

2.2.1 Online learning

Today computers and electronic devices are indispensable components of our daily routine. Even the simplest action seems impossible without an electronic device: people use their smartphones even when they go for a walk, counting every step they take and how many calories they burn. It is not surprising that many people try to learn foreign languages through applications and websites. Pichiassi (1999: 183-187) lists some advantages of e-learning: individualization of the teaching process, self-pacing, interactivity, evaluation, engagement, availability.

♦ Individualization of the teaching process: the learner can explore individual paths that are personalized according to the learner's linguistic level. Online platforms allow the learner to choose the quantity and the difficulty of linguistic tasks.

♦ Self-pacing: the learner can manage his/her own learning path in autonomy.

♦ Interactivity and evaluation: the learner receives immediate feedbacks on the correctness of his/her answers and exercises, so that s/he can check immediately what was correct and what was wrong.

♦ Engagement: e-learning is particularly involving because it provides images, sounds and tasks can be carried out playfully.

♦ Availability： the learner can exploit the electronic device whenever he/she has time without any kind of limits.

In addition, e-learning:

♦ enhances communication and collaboration (Shahrokni et al., 2020);

♦ stimulates creativity (Levy & Stockwell, 2006);

♦ lessens stress and anxiety (Lam, 2004).

Dealing with a computer, which has not any feelings no ideas of its own reduces stress and anxiety. The learner, indeed, is not afraid of being judged, since there is no risk of making a mistake in front of other people or being considered ridiculous. One might undervalue the role of the emotions in the learning process; however, as explained by Krashen (1985) in his monitor theory, affective factors are highly influential, and negative feelings may constitute a mental block by inhibiting language learning (see section 1.2). Anxiety, in particular, is maybe the emotion that has received the most considerable attention in the literature so far and is mentioned by Krashen (1985) himself among the negative feelings lifting the affective filter up. According to Horwitz & Young (1986) anxiety would be particularly linked to language learning: they define it as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning, arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz & Young, 1986: 128). For this reason, some learners, especially those particularly shy, may find e-learning particularly comfortable and relaxing.

2.2.1.1 Duolingo

One popular application is called Duolingo, which is highly rated on the web and among the 5 most used applications for language learning. This online resource is free, (this means learners do not have to pay to use it) easy to download and supported by computers, smartphones and tablets. It could be used by beginners in their spare time as a supplement. On this app learners can train their listening comprehension, repeat grammar, learn vocabulary. The app is organized by topic, for example: food, animals, personal pronouns, adjectives, and so on. As concerns grammar learning, lessons of grammar are sorted like vocabulary: they are organized according to topic and presented to the learner according to the level of difficulty, so that, for example, before doing exercises on adjectives, the learner has to pass the lesson on "pronouns". The negative aspect is that learners cannot choose topics randomly, for example topic "family", before having access to it, they have to pass through previous steps (like food, animals and plurals). For this reason, the app could prove boring to intermediate students, since they have to inevitably repeat what they already know. It does not give students the chance to choose a level (A1, A2, B1, and so on), so that one has to start from the very beginning. There is the chance to skip the first lessons with an initial test, but only the very basic ones.

Another negative aspect is that Duolingo does not stimulate creativity and rejects slightly free translations. Translation exercises, indeed, accept only word for word translation. I translated "i momenti dell'anno" with "the year's moments", but the only accepted translation was "the moments of the year". Similarly, the translation "Scrive di amarla" was rejected as well: "he writes that he loves her" was in fact translated only with "lui scrive che lui ama lei", which an Italian native speaker would never say in a natural situation.

Let us now turn to the positive aspects as concerns the listening comprehension: it is possible to listen to native speakers at natural speed or, if necessary, it is possible to listen to recordings at a slower speed, clicking on the symbol of a turtle:　　　　　. What is more, entries can be later reviewed to consolidate their acquisition　　　　through recap tests. If the learner wants to repeat the already used entries, there is a summary list which is automatically updated: every time that the learner encounters a new item, the application registers it on this list. If the entry's meaning is not clear, the learner can check the translation in his/her mother language. Like Duolingo, there are many other examples

of online tools that language learner can use in their spare time; its presentation merely gives us an example of how a common online resource works. These tools cannot be considered as substitutes of language classes, but they can surely be additional means.

2.2.1.2 Kahoot!

An interesting platform which allows teachers to create their own tests is *Kahoot!*. Teachers can either create their own quizzes or play/ remix public Kahoot quizzes, created by previous users and available on the platform. In order to join the game, students do not have to create an account, they just have to enter the PIN provided by the teacher and to choose a nickname among those suggested (or to choose to have it assigned randomly). Once the game starts, questions are projected onto a screen along with answer choices. Students submit responses using an internet-connected device (computer, tablet, or phone). They have a few seconds to answer to each question. Points are awarded taking into account both response accuracy and speed. To make the atmosphere more joyful, the screen is colourful. Four bright colours are indeed employed, (red, blue, yellow and green) one for each answer. Teachers can also choose to create puzzles: they can ask students to place blocks of information into the correct order, to sort events into chronological order, or to correctly assemble spelling words, making spelling an interactive game.
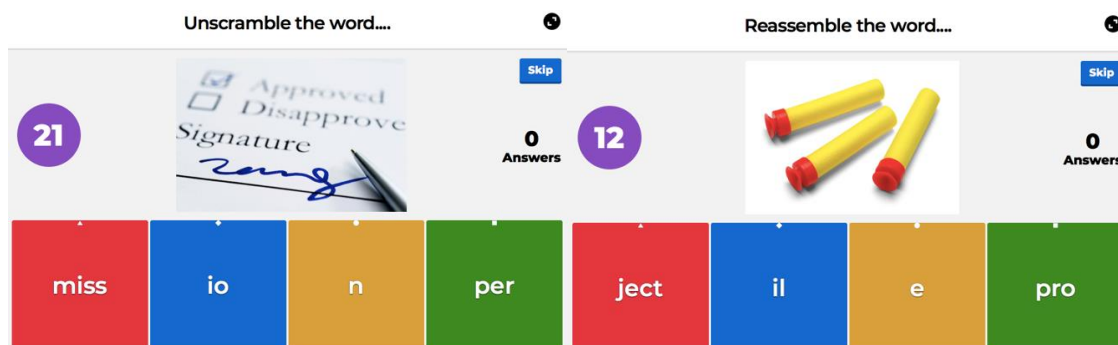
Figure 7- Kahoot! puzzle
source: Kahoot.com

Kahoot! is therefore a multitasking tool, which could result useful especially in distance learning, since teachers can easily send the challenge link to students via email, along

with the challenge pin. Like this, students can interact with the other fellow students even from home.

2.2.1.3 Computer-Assisted Language Learning and the Web 2.0

Duolingo and Kahoot are only two examples, but the Web is full of many other resources that could be exploited to learn foreign languages. Scholars refer to the totality of these learning resources with the name of CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) tools. Beatty (2010: 7) defines CALL as follows: "*any process in which a learner uses a computer and, as result, improves his or her language*"[11]. These means are very appealing: they are more practical, since they can be comfortably used at home and require less time. Web 2.0 tools are in fact accessible to many students. Hence "the portability of Web 2.0 technology makes the learning experience convenient" (Malhiwski, 2010: 67). Learners can be immersed in the target language dimension at any time, from wherever they may be (Malhiwski, 2010). "Flexibility of time […] characterizes CALL" (Ali & Abdulaziz, 2018: 45) and such flexibility offers learners the chance to choose what topic to learn at the suitable time they prefer. Kioumarsi et al. (2018: 160) highlight the usefulness of Wikispaces (social writing platform for online collaborative process writing activities), defining them as "new, time-saving, beneficial and enjoyable".

Web 2.0 tools are not only convenient, but also particularly engaging, because ideas are communicated vividly and learners have the perception of being immerged in target culture. Virtual words, in particular, stimulate curiosity and appeal to learners' motivation (Alizadeh, 2019). An important element which differentiates virtual realities from traditional classes is imagination. Virtual realities, indeed, are built up by learners, whose creativity is fostered (Levy & Stockwell, 2006). They give learners the chance of immersing themselves in the learning environment in ways different from those allowed by traditional learning. Learners are not merely presented with topics, they are not passive witnesses, but they discover facts on their own and at the same time they create them: they "discover and construct knowledge at their own pace following their own preferred order, thus leading to the creation of individual learning path" (Alizadeh, 2019: 24).

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[11] original italics

CALL, then, fosters learners' autonomy, because of the opportunities the latter are given to direct their own learning (Peterson, 2001; Benson, 2001; Levy and Stockwell, 2006; Beatty, 2010; Ali & Abdulaziz, 2018) .

At the same time, virtual realities and communities allow for socialization among participants, hence promoting cooperation and collaboration. Second Language Socialization (SLS) "explores how second language learners become members of the target language social groups" (Shahrokni et al., 2020: 42). SLS is a crucial aspect in the field of language acquisition. In Chapter 1 language was described as a social phenomenon, the product of the interaction among speakers and at the same time a means that allows communication to occur (see section 1.1.2). The literature reviewed shows that MMOGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Games) have the potential to be considered a useful tool in language education, because they support SLS (see for example Malhiwski, 2010; Bailey et al., 2017; Kioumarsi et al., 2018; Alizadeh, 2019; Shahrokni et al., 2020). MMOG, indeed, "emphasize social dynamics, collaboration […] providing a graphically rich immersive simulated environment supportive of language learning elements such as engagement, social interaction, just-in-time feedback, and collaboration" (Shahrokni et al., 2020: 42). In virtual environments, then, learners have wide "opportunities to engage in collaborative interactions with their peers within a media-rich learning context, thus leading to higher motivation and engagement levels" (Alizadeh, 2019: 24).

> Web 2.0 technologies can be any of the tools of features on the Internet that allow the user to be a social producer. The "new" Internet is seen as a "participatory" web rather than a static resource. This active participation by the user enhances the tools themselves through their use. This is what O'Reilly (2003) terms as the "Architecture of Participation". This concept has been revolutionary to the Internet and its evolution (Malhiwski, 2010: 23).

In a MMOG, indeed, players need to communicate to each other in order to fulfil the mission of the game. When players come from different nations and therefore speak different languages, English is very often their lingua franca. Hence, playing a game becomes an opportunity for linguistic growth. Collaboration has positive effects on learning: it involves learners working in group to complete a task and for this reason it is employed by many teachers as an educational method (Kioumarsi et al., 2018).

Even Facebook can be used for learning purposes, as a support to activities of communication. Facebook belongs to the group called SNS (it means Social Network Services), "websites that allow users to interact and collaborate in a virtual community"

(Bailey et al., 2017: 12). Integrating social networks in language learning could prove a good practice to positively effect the learning process and to stimulate students' active participation within the learning community (Alm, 2006). Facebook, in particular, is popular, has a friendly user interface it is one of the most downloaded applications and is daily used by many students (Bailey et al., 2017).

Another interesting aspect of Web 2.0 tools is that communicating online helps learners overcoming problems of anxiety and stress arising during face-to-face conversations. The screen is in fact like a filter, which lessens stress and facilitates more introverse people in the interaction with their interlocutors. In other words, those people who often find it difficult to break the ice and begin conversations for psychological reasons, they may find it easier to join online communities and not to feel isolated or marginalised. Maybe behind an invented character, it is easier to protect one's true self. A seminal study by Lam (2004) demostrated that the MMOG dynamics allowed the participants to compensate for their face-to-face communication failures, as their newly found confidence transferred to offline contexts. In other words, the MMOG virtual experience can even have positive effects on real offline conversations, because on the one hand it helps learners building up their self-esteem, on the other hand it allows them to train and increase their language proficiency.

What is more, thanks to sounds and images, rich inputs persist in the visual memory (Kioumarsi et al., 2018). In 2007 Kilickaya studied the effectiveness of CALL systems on learners' proficiency: he found out that students instructed through the integration of CALL systems to language teaching scored higher than those who received only traditional instruction. In other words, Kilickaya (2007) realized that participants to his study learned better through the aid of CALL systems.

To sum up, studies show that CALL actively involves learners, stimulates their curiosity, makes them feel more comfortable than face-to-face interaction may do, raises motivation and finally fosters autonomy in learning. For this reason teachers should encourage learners to exploit the opportunities that Web 2.0 offers, which are "new channels to use the target language outside the classroom" (Bailey et al., 2017: 13). Therefore, it is reasonable to affirm that "virtual reality can be a useful addition to L2 teaching and learning as it has the potential to bring a whole new dimension to the realm

of language education resulting in enhanced learning and increased motivation and engagement" (Alizadeh, 2019: 21).

2.3 Motivation

In Chapter 1 I listed motivation among the several factors influencing second language acquisition and provided some classifications (see section 1.2.6). The L2 domain is often characterised by learning failure: it is very common to have failed in the study of a foreign language: "without sufficient motivation […] even the brightest learners are unlikely to persist long enough to attain really useful languages" (Dörnyei, 2001: 5). Motivation is not easy to gain: on the contrary, it is hard-won, and it can easily be lost, so learner must work hard to maintain it (Little, 1991a). Motivated learners are those who demonstrate perseverance and persistence "during the lengthy and often tedious process of mastering a foreign/second language (L2)" (Dörnyei, 2001: 5). Motivation, indeed, must be first of all generated, then maintained and also protected. A simple but important distinction is between motivation *for* engagement and motivation *during* engagement (Williams & Burden, 1997). The former concerns the initial decision of doing something, determined by sufficient reasons. Then, after having set a goal e decided to initiate a learning process, the second dimensional stage comes, during which the initial motivation must be made last: motivation *during* engagement is concerned in sustaining the effort, in persisting in the action. Similarly, Dörnyei (2001) calls *choice motivation* the motivation at its initial stage, because learners actually choose the goal to pursue. At this stage the motivation is called *executive motivation*, because it requires an active involvement of the learner in the motivation's maintainance and protection. What is more, the scholar adds a third stage called *motivational retrospection,* which involves an evaluation of the accomplished activities and of the learning performances (Dörnyei, 2001). Again, autonomous good language learners are those who are themselves responsible for this developmental stage.

While analysing the concept of motivation in Chapter 1, an interesting aspect was borrowed from Lightbown & Spada (1993), according to whom motivation is intertwined with success in a circular relationship: "the more one succeeds, the grater one's motivation; the greater one's motivation, the more one succeeds" (Lightbown & Spada, 1993: 112). Yet, how is it possible to keep motivation alive? Following this line of thought, motivation is kept alive by succeeding, and success is obtained only through

high motivation. All human beings aim at success: we are in fact characterised by a *self-actualising tendency*, described as "the desire to achieve personal growth and to develop fully the capacities and talents we have inherited" (Dörnyei, 2001:8). That of self-actualisation is listed by Maslow (1954) among the five human basic needs: physiological needs (such as hunger and thirst), which have to be satisfied first in order to survive; safety needs (the need for security and protection); love needs (need for love and affection); esteem needs (need for approval and recognition). At the highest level of this hierarchy there are self-actualisation needs, whose satisfaction leads to personal fulfilment. Maslow's hierarchy posits the basic, biological needs at the bottom of the pyramid. Going upwards, the needs become less objective and commonly shared and more subjective and personal, linked to the single individual. In other words, while all human beings need to satisfy hunger with foods and thirst with water, there is not a universally shared paradigm for the way of satisfaction of self-actualisation needs: each individual has (or has to find) his own. According to Dörnyei (2001) it is in particular the self-actualising tendency which is the best motivating force. As also Scheidecker and Freeman (1999: 129) claim, "the elusive concept of self-esteem is really spelled S*U*C*C*E*S*S". Even those students who do not aim at success (which is Maslow's categorization is at the top level of the hierarchy), they will at least enact face saving behaviours. It is in fact a human need to maintain and defend a certain personal value and worth (Covington, 1992).

Going back to the concept of motivation, Dörnyei & Ushioda (2013: 13) propose a simple formulation, elaborated after Atkinson and Raynor (1974):

$$\text{expectancy} \times \text{value} = \text{motivation}$$

This formulation mirrors the principles of the expectancy- value theories, according to which motivation is the products of two factors: the expectancy of success in a given linguistic task the possible rewards in case of successful performance plus the value attributed to them both.

> The greater the perceived likelihood of goal attainment and the greater the incentive value of the goal, the higher the degree of the individual's positive motivation. Conversely, it is unlikely that effort will be invested in a task if either factor is missing, that is, if the individual is convinced that he or she cannot succeed no matter how hard he or she tries, or if the task does not lead to valued outcomes (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013: 13).

In their original theorization, Atkinson & Raynor (1974) involved two further components in the definition of motivation: need for achievement and fear of failure. The former is part of the individual's personality, determined by internal rather than external factors: learners want to achieve successful performance for their own sake, rather than for extrinsic possible rewards. Opposite the need achievement is the fear of failure, which, on the contrary, is highly demotivating; because of such fear, the learner is more inclined towards face saving behaviors, remaining for example silent to avoid negative outcomes. It is clear that students are more inclined to be engaged in what assures them success. On the contrary, if they are not sure about the success of the performance, they are less likely to get involved and take risks.

Another interesting theorization which turns around the future expectancy principle is the concept of *possible selves*, elaborated by Markus & Nurius (1986). Possible selves are "the ideal selves that we would very much like to become. They are also the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming" (Markus & Nurius, 1986: 954). They are representations of possibile self of the future, although they derive from past selves. Furthermore, they are "incentives for future behavior" (Markus & Nurius, 1986: 954); individuals, indeed, are highly motivated by the idea of achieving a condition in which where their current selves match (or at least resemble) their desired futureself-images. If, on the contrary possible selves are not positive images, but selves that individuals are afraid to become, than the latter will be motivated to avoid such negative previsions. However, images of future selves have the potentiality of motivating action only if some conditions are satisfied. A fundamental prerequisite is the actual existence of a possible self: the learner must therefore have a desired future self-image, must have an image of how he ought to become. Such future self-image must be first of all: *different* from the current self-image : "if there is no observable gap between current and future selves, no increased effort is felt necessary" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013: 83); *plausible,* in the sense that the learner must perceive such self-image as possible to realize. Yet, "effort is not exerted if the attainment of the future self is too unlikely or too likely" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013: 83); in other words, the possible self must necessarily be plausible, but, at the same time, not too certain: if it is given for granted or perceived as automatic, learners will not put much effort on it. In addition, it is not only desired self-image that must *elaborated* and *vivid,* but also its negative counterpart: "maximal

motivational effectiveness is achieved if the learner also has a vivid image about the *negative consequences* of failing to achieve the desired end-state" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013: 84).

Motivation is influenced not only by future previsions of success or failure, but also by past experiences. In particular, if learners had particularly negative past experiences, the feelings deriving from them may negative effect learners' motivation (Graham, 1994). On the basis of these assumptions, Ushioda (1998: 82) formulated a theoretical framework of motivation, describing it from a temporal perspective (see Figure 8). Therefore, teachers must be aware of the impact of their actions on the student's attitude towards the subject and even on the school career. Hence the necessity of creating a positive classroom atmosphere, encouraging and stimulating learners, since emotions such as apprehension, fear of failure and other negative feelings can stand as a psychological barrier to the learning capability of the human being.

Motivation deriving from experience
Positive L2-learning experiences
Intrinsic affective rewards
Positive L2-related experience
Other experience

Personal goals
Short term goals/incentives
Language-intrinsic goals
Other goals/priorities
Motivation directed towards future goals

L2 development over time
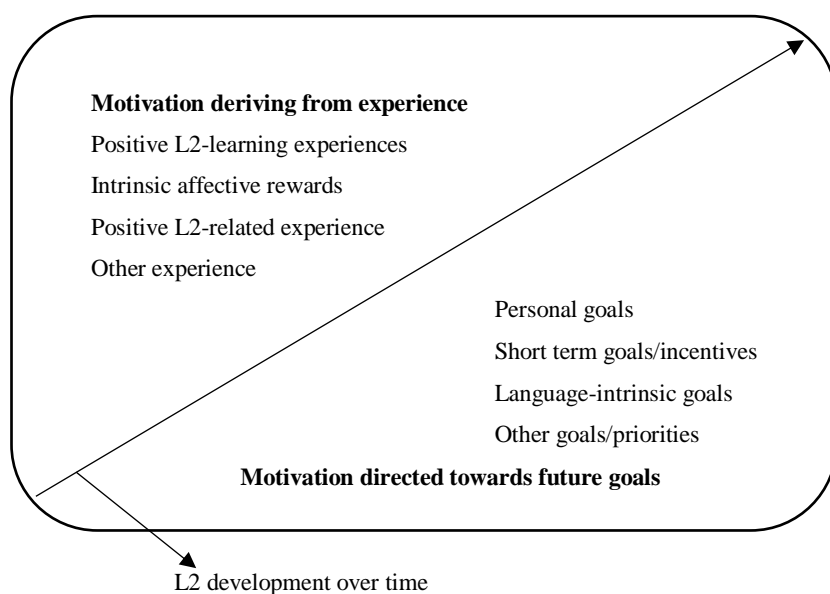
Figure 8- Theoretical framework of motivation from a temporal perspective
Source: adapted from Ushioda (1998: 82)

Yet now that the conditions for motivation has been clarified, a question remains unsolved: whose responsibility is it to motivate learners? Is it teachers' responsibility? As Ford (1992: 202) states, it is not possible "to make people want to learn, work hard, and

act in a responsible manner. […] Facilitation, not control, should be the guiding idea in attempts to motivate humans". Clearly, motivation cannot be externally imposed: teachers cannot force their students to be interested in the taught subject. On the contrary, what they can do is to stimulate such motivation and to facilitate the acquisitional process, for what is in their possibilities. In this regard, Dörnyei (2001: 29) proposes a scheme which summarizes the components of motivational teaching practice (see Figure 9).

Creating the basic motivational conditions
- Appropriate teacher behaviours
- A pleasant and supportive atmosphere
- A cohesive learner group with appropriate group norms

Encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation
- Promoting motivational attributions
- Providing motivational feedback
- Increasing learner satisfaction
- Offering rewards and grades in a motivating manner

Motivational teaching practice

Generating initial motivation
- Enhancing the learner's L2-related values and attitudes
- Increasing the learner's expectancy of success
- Increasing the learner's goal-orientedness
- Making the teaching materials relevant for the learners
- Creating realistic learner beliefs

Maintaining and protecting motivation
- Making learning stimulating and enjoyable
- Presenting tasks in a motivating way
- Setting specific learner goals
- Protecting the learner's self-esteem and increasing their self-confidence
- Allowing learners to maintain a positive social image
- Creating learner autonomy
- Promoting self-motivating strategies
- Promoting cooperation among the learners

Figure 9- The components of motivational teaching practice in the L2 classroom
Source: Dörnyei (2001: 29)

Teachers, indeed, can positively effect students' motivation by creating, for example, a pleasant classroom atmosphere: showing helpfulness and willingness to answer any question; giving any help or explanation required; tolerating mistakes rather than embarrassing less proficient learners; reducing the anxiety; encouraging students. As previously stated in this same section, according to Covington's self-worth theory students aim at face saving (Covington, 1992). Consequently, if students recognize the classroom as a safe place, then they gain confidence and are encouraged (Dörnyei, 2001).
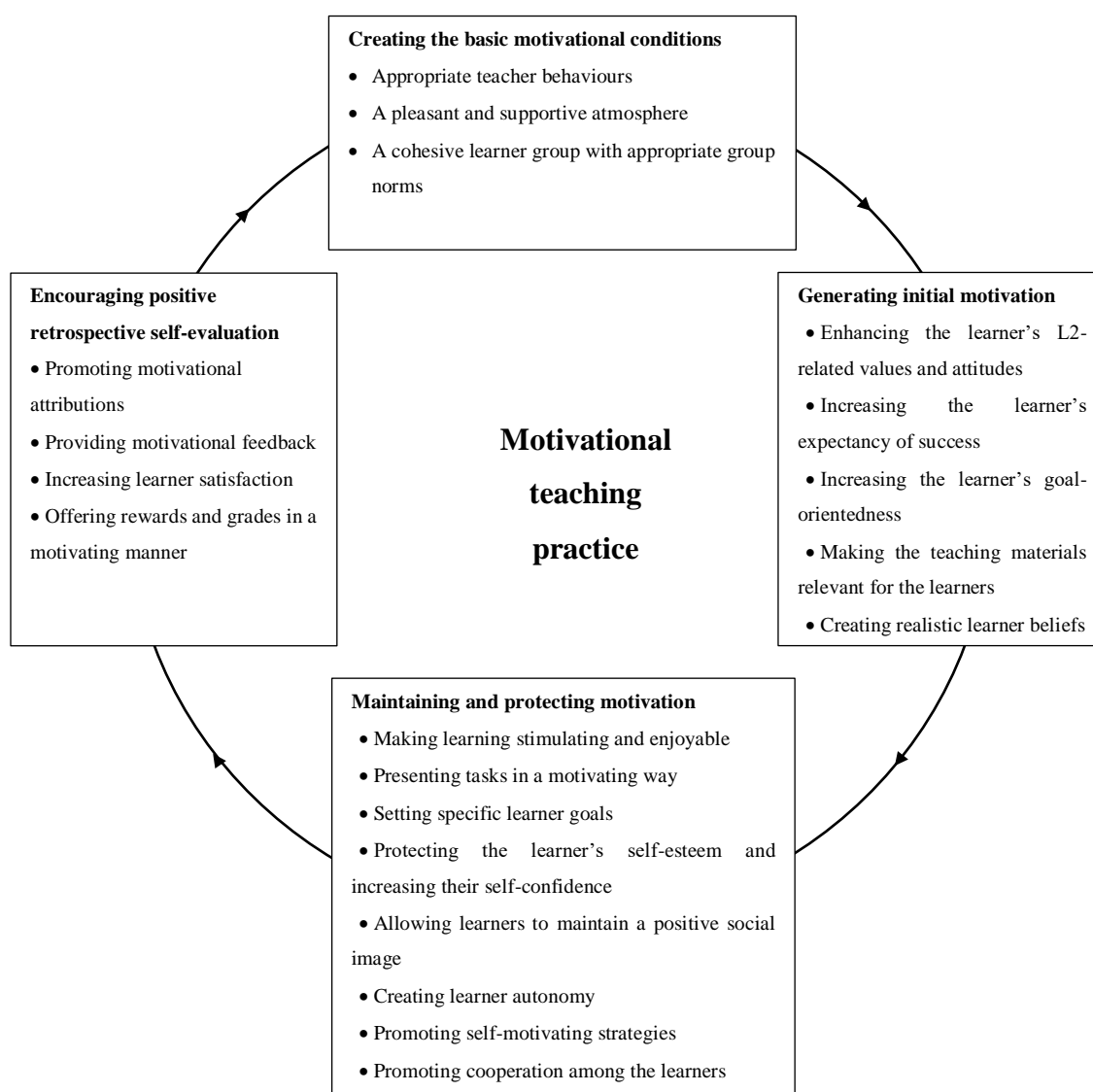
What is more if teachers directly encourage them and show they believe in them, then students as a consequence believe in themselves even more: "self-esteem grows from the beliefs of others. […] When those you respect think you can, *you* think you can" (Raffini, 1993: 147).

However, one must not think that the responsibility burden should be carried exclusively by teachers. Autonomous learners are those who, on the contrary, are themselves responsible for their own learning process and are actively involved in motivation enhancement. In other words, autonomous learners have the capacity of motivating themselves.

> Self-motivation is a question of applying positive thought patterns and belief structures so as to optimise and sustain one's involvement in learning […] a capacity for *effective* motivational thinking […]. It entails minimising the damage when these experiences are negative, and maximising the subjective rewards when these experiences are positive, and so fostering optimum motivational condition for continued engagement in language learning (Ushioda, 1997: 41).

A noteworthy quote comes from Ushioda (1996: 2), a teacher herself:

> Now […] in the age of learner-centredness in education and of learner autonomy in particular, it may be that the teacher's own agenda needs to change. After all, the appropriate question no longer seems to be *how can we motivate our learners?* but *how can we help learners to motivate themselves?*

So what can language learners do to sustain their motivation? According to many scholars (see Naiman *et al.*, 1996; Nunan, 1996; Oxford, 1990; Griffiths, 2008), good language learners are not only those privileged because of their age, personal attitude and mental predisposition to language learning, but also those who use some 'tricks': "little 'tricks' lead the better student to the right answer" (Rubin, 1975: 42). Such tricks are learning strategies, and, among them, there are motivational strategies as well.

2.4 Learning strategies

For decades language teachers and researchers have been fascinated by what successful language learners do to support their learning, to learn efficiently. In her landmark article, Rubin (1975) affirms that the different success of second language learners also depends on the strategies they adopt. In other words, what makes the difference between the successful and less successful learner is, according to the author, the use of productive learning strategies. "What" successful language learners do is use learning strategies. In Oxford's list of learning strategies

> Strategic learning refers to a learner's active, intentional engagement in the learning process by selectively attending to a learning problem, mobilizing available resources, deciding on the best available plan for action, carrying out the plan, monitoring the performance, and evaluating the results for future action. Strategic learning is triggered and defined by task demands and is tied to a purpose. The purpose of strategic learning is to solve. a learning problem, perform a novel task, accelerate the learning rate, or achieve overall learning success (Gu, 2018: 146).

Several scholars have attempted to provide a definition of learning strategies. Here I report a few of them:

- "the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge" (Rubin, 1975: 43);

- "behaviours and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning that are intended to influence the learner's encoding process" (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986: 315);

- the "steps taken by students to enhance their own learning" (Oxford, 1990: 1);

- "a strategy is therefore some form of activity that is used in response to problems when and where they arise" (Grenfell & Macaro, 2007: 10);

- "thoughts and actions, consciously chosen and operationalized by language learners, to assist them in carrying out a multiplicity of tasks from the very onset of learning to the most advanced levels of target-language (TL) performance" (Cohen, 2011:7);

- "operationalization of the skill- that is, selected processes to actualize the skill" (Cohen, 2018).

The strategies' effectiveness, however, depends not so much on the strategy itself, but rather on the way in which the learner exploits it, on the learners' internal characteristics (such as age, attitude, motivation, and so on), and on external factors as well (such as task at hand, learning environment, richness of input/output opportunities). Strategies must

therefore be collocated in a wider framework in order to interpret their role adequately and evaluate their effectiveness in language learning (Cohen, 2007). What is sure is that they have the enhancement of language learning as their purpose; they aim at making the latter "easier, faster and more enjoyable"; they are exploited to perform specific tasks and solve specific problems (Cohen, 2007: 39). Oxford (1990: 9) sums up the language learning strategies features as follows:

Language learning strategies: …
1. Contribute to the main goal, communicative competence.
2. Allow learners to become more self-directed.
3. Expand the role of teachers.
4. Are problem-oriented.
5. Are specific action taken by the learner.
6. Involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive.
7. Support learning both directly and indirectly.
8. Are not always observable.
9. Are often conscious.
10. Can be taught.
11. Are flexible.
12. Are influenced by a variety of factors.

Figure 10- Feature of language learning strategies
Source: Oxford (1990: 9)

As Oxford (1990: 9) observes in point 9, unfortunately learning strategy' use is not always observable: some strategies, indeed, are applied covertly and cannot be revealed just because they occur in the learner's mind. Scholars have often observed students with the aim of identifying the strategies they used, in the belief that exemplification of success could be a significant aid for the less successful learners. Often the mere observation did not have the expected results. Most of the time, indeed, students revealed their preferences and difficulties through surveys and interviews about learning habits and experiences (Naiman *et al.*, 1978).

In a later study, Naiman *et al.* (2007) present an interview with adult students. After having analysed the survey results, they identified the most recurrent strategies, which they listed under five major groups: learning strategies linked to an active task approach; realization of language as a system; realization of language as means of communication and interaction; management of affective demands; monitoring of L2 performance (see Naiman *et al.*, 2007: 30-33). In addition to learning strategies, they provide a large number of techniques which emerged from the surveys, and which the authors classified according to the various linguistic skills: techniques linked to grammar; those linked to vocabulary; listening comprehension; learning to talk/write/read, to cope with the development of linguistic skills. For example, the most widely adopted technique technique for sound acquisition resulted to be "repeating aloud after teacher and/or native speaker"; that most used for grammar learning resulted to be simply following the rules as presented in grammar textbooks, while the second most widely used was its opposite: using the grammar book only when strictly necessary (for further information see Naiman *et al*., 2007: 33-37).

As concerns strategy classification, Cohen (2018: 33-34) suggests three main ways: by goal, by function, by skill. Among the goal-oriented strategies there are strategies used to learn the TL (like grouping a memorizing strategies) and strategies employed to use the already learned TL material (like retrieval and rehearsal strategies). Function-oriented strategies are used to carry out a specific function (such as planning, monitoring, evaluating). In the end, the skill approach is a popular way of classifying strategies, with regard to the two productive skills (speaking and writing), the two receptive skills (listening and reading), plus vocabulary learning. These are the main classifications, but strategies can also be classified according to learners' age, proficiency level, specific needs (Cohen, 2018: 34).

Yet with no doubt the most exhaustive learning strategy' classification provided so far has to be attributed to Oxford (1990), who tried to involve in her classification all the strategies previously classified by other scholars. Such an attempt resulted in the classification of sixty-two strategies: these were divided into two classes, six groups, and nineteen sets. For reasons of space, here only the main groups will be reported (see Figure 11). The main distinction is first of all between direct and indirect strategies (for the complete classification see Oxford, 1990).

DIRECT STRATEGIES		INDIRECT STRATEGIES	
I. Memory strategies	A. Creating mental linkages	I. Metacognitive strategies	A. Centering your learning
	B. Applying images and sounds		B. Arranging and planning your learning
	C. Reviewing well		C. Evaluating your learning
	D. Employing action		
II.Cognitive strategies	A. Practicing	II. Affective strategies	A. Lowering your anxiety
	B. Receiving and sending messages		B. Encouraging yourself
	C. Analysing and reasoning		C. Taking your emotional temperature
	D. Creating structure for input and output		
III. Compensation strategies	A. Guessing intelligently	III. Social strategies	A. Asking questions
	B. Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing		B. Cooperating with others
			C. Empathizing with others

Figure 11- Strategy System
Source: Oxford (1990: 17)

2.4.1 Direct strategies

These are so called because they directly involve the target language. Each class is further distinguished in three groups: the direct strategies group involves memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies. Oxford (1990) found a funny memory aid to remember them: by using acronyms deriving from the strategies' initial letters.

Memory strategies are used to store and retrieve information. The acronym for memory strategies is CARE (memory strategies being **c**reating mental linkages, **a**pplying images and sounds, **r**eviewing well, **e**mploying action) used in the sentence: "Take CARE

of your memory, and your memory will take CARE of you!" (Oxford, 1990: 38), which is a memory aid as well.

1) Creating mental linkages is achieved for example through word-grouping: words are grouped following specific criteria, for example according to the semantic field. An efficient way of grouping is using semantic maps made up of related words. Acronyms are memory aids as well. Oxford herself (1990) used the above-mentioned acronyms CARE/PRAC and so on, to help remembering learning strategies. In my life as student two Italian acronyms have been extremely useful to me. One of them is DEPOSITO, taught to me by my French teacher to keep in mind silent consonants at the end of a word, which, indeed, are: d,e,p, s and t. Another useful acronym is TE.CA.MO.LO (for Italian *tempo, causa, modo, luogo*), that helped me remember word order in German sentences: first the time expressions, than those indicating the cause of the action, followed by words expressing modality and in the end words indicating where the action took place.

2) "Applying images and sounds" is one of the memory strategy' groups. According to some statistics, "human beings perceive informative messages, in average, at the 83% through the sight, at 11% with the hearing, at the 3,5% with the sense of smell, at the 1,5% with the touch and at the 1% through the taste" (Pichiassi, 1999: 138). It involves strategies such as using mental images, linking new words to familiar sounds, creating rhymes, in other words they link sight and hearing to language learning, especially when the learner must learn vocabulary. Then, Pichiassi (1999) argues that the 5 senses facilitate memorization. With a visual image in particular, the comprehension of the message is widened, and memorization is supported. In order to link words to the corresponding images, it is possible to use flashcards (with the written word on one side and the image on the other). The sense of hearing can be exploited linking two words with are pronounce similarly: Oxford (1990: 64) provides the example of the French word *poubelle,* which could be associated to the similar-sounding *plus belle* in the sentence "*la plus belle poubelle*" (the prettiest trash can).

3) Reviewing well means reviewing in intervals what has been learned to consolidate the knowledge.

4) Employing action involves associating words with meaningful movements (for example, acting out the new word/ expression). The Total Physical Response method elaborated by Asher in 1979 and discussed at section 1.3.2.3 was built on this specific

strategy, because of the assumption that physical actions help storing new information in memory. As already explained in Chapter 1, the learner was asked to integrate verbal responses with physical action, by acting out commands and performing tasks.

"Cognitive strategies are PRAC-tical for language learning" (Oxford, 1990: 44) (cognitive strategies being: **p**racticing, **r**eceiving and sending messages, **a**nalysing and reasoning, **c**reating structure for input and output). Cognitive strategies are used to manipulate and transform the target language; they "operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990: 44).

1) Practicing: the strategies linked to practicing consist in exploiting every possibility of language use, like reading books in the target language, listening to music, speaking with an interlocutor in the target language or just repeating alone words/ sentences.

2) Receiving and sending messages: it involves understanding messages and producing messages. One of these strategies is called by Oxford "getting the idea quickly" and it involves two procedures: skimming and scanning. The former consists in having a quick look at the text to find the general ideas that the text express; the latter is useful to search for detailed information.

3) Analysing and reasoning: this is a combination of both top-down and bottom-up strategies: the former require the learner not to focus on single words, but to catch the overall meaning of the text, focusing on those words which are familiar. On the contrary, bottom-up strategies consist in breaking the text into sentences (or sentences into words) and, departing from the various parts, understanding the meaning of the whole sentence.

4) Creating structure for input and output: the strategies to create a structure are highlighting important information, like taking notes and summarizing.

"Language learners can GO far with compensation strategies" (Oxford, 1990: 48). Such strategies are definitely useful to make up for missing knowledge. In particular, they are frequently used when the learner has a limited vocabulary repertoire at his/her disposal. Therefore, when a learner encounters a new item, s/he can try to guess its meaning. As Rubin argued:

> the good language learner is a willing and accurate guesser. It seems that the good language learner is both comfortable with uncertainty […] and willing to try out his guesses […] gathers and stores information in an efficient manner […] uses all the clues which the setting offers him […] (Rubin, 1975: 45).

Moreover, such strategies can also help the learner overcome speaking and/or writing limitations: when the learner, indeed, can cope with the lack of knowledge by using synonyms of the word s/he does not remember, by using circumlocutions, paraphrasing, or even physical gestures. In Chapter 1 I noted how verbal languages can be accompanied with meaningful facial expressions or bodily gestures, that is paralinguistic activities which are meaningful in the sense that convey a specific meaning (see section 1.1.1). Another trick to compensate for the lack of knowledge could be simplifying the message, being less precise and avoiding too complicated details: "communication strategies might entail approximations mime, […] message abandonment" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990: 43). If necessary, the learner can also borrow the missing words from the mother language, if the latter is known by the interlocutor.

2.4.2 Indirect strategies

These are so called because they do not involve a direct use of the target language, but indirectly support language learning. Indirect strategies are divided into metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, social strategies.

Metacognitive strategies are meant to regulate and coordinate the cognitive process: they involve not only metacognitive knowledge (it means knowledge about learning) but also the processes which aim at its control and regulation (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). They are essential in language learning: without them learners have no direction (O'Malley et al., 1985). Examples of metacognitive strategies linked to learning arrangement and planning are: setting realistic goals and objectives; seeking practice opportunities (such texting a penfriend, listening to music in the target language, watching movies). Another example are the strategies adopted to center one's learning, such as paying attention. Oxford (1990: 154) distinguishes between "directed" and "selective attention". Directed attention is simply a synonymous of concentration, since the learner decided to pay attention to the task at hand and avoid distractions; the selective attention is the decision -made before the begin of the activity- to focus on determined information. Scanning could be an example, since it is a rapid search for a specific piece of information.

In the end, this category involves self-evaluation strategies, to evaluate one's own outcomes (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). As concerns listening comprehension, the student

can assess the percentage s/he understands by listening to records and comparing results after weeks/months; the same can be done in the case of reading comprehension, too, by estimating the percentage of the text understood; speaking can be evaluated by comparing one's own recorded speech with that of an expert speaker.

Affective strategies regulate the learner's emotions and keep motivation alive. The learner can, for example, attempt to lessen stress and reduce anxiety by listening to relaxing music or deep breathing. Also, making positive statements, talking to oneself and giving oneself a reward are good kinds of self-encouragement (Oxford, 1990). Both in Chapter 1 (section 1.2) and in section 2.2.1 of this chapter I underlined the high influence of emotions on learning in general and on language learning in particular. Hence the necessity of exploiting every possible strategy to control negative emotions and to keep the affective filter down, of turning the negative emotions into positive ones, of establishing positive dynamics within the classroom and of generating an overall positive classroom atmosphere. Teachers can also adopt affective strategies to make the environment more relaxed and help students reduce their anxiety levels: for example, by tolerating errors, by lengthening the wait time after questions or by reformulating the latter if learners do not understand them (Gkonou, 2018). After all, as claimed by Oxford & Schramm (2007), learning strategies are in fact of little use if not combined with affective strategies.

Social strategies regulate the interaction with fellow students and are necessary to develop communicative competence. They are useful to develop "positive interdependence" and "mutual support" (Oxford, 1990: 145-146), which can be reached for example by cooperating with peers, asking peers for corrections/clarification. Interacting with an interlocutor is a very important factor in language learning, especially if the interlocutor possesses a higher target language proficiency than the learner does. In other words, interacting with another learner and be exposed to understandable inputs is a considerable advantage, especially if our interlocutor is a native speaker. In Chapter 1 I considered how children are advantaged with respect to adult learners especially because, compared to them, they are exposed to a higher degree of input, in terms of both quality and quantity. Also, "in Vygotsky's view, learning takes place through (in his terms, is 'mediated by') dialogues with a more capable other, that is, a teacher, parent, or more

advanced peer" (Oxford & Schramm, 2007: 53). Language is in fact a social phenomenon (see paragraph 1.1.2) and the social context does affect language learning:

> From this perspective, strategies are linked both to specific cognitive activities and also to the social communities in which they occur. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation, but are built on complex systems of relationships developed within social settings. The individual learner is defined by, as well as defines, these relationships (Takeuchi, Griffiths, & Coyle, 2007: 77).

On the other hand, if a learner only interacts with less proficient interlocutors, s/he may not only stop making progresses, but, in the worst case, s/he even risks to regress, to return to an earlier and less advanced stage of development. For this reason, if the learner establishes relationship with more capable others, this will be for sure an advantage for him/her. Moreover, establishing a dialogue with others has further positive effects, which go beyond the mere language learning: learning how to deal with others, how to work in a team is essential because it is a skill that students will exploit not only at the academic level, but also in their future working environment.

2.4.3 Learning strategies and consciousness

The degree of consciousness in the use of language strategies is a rather controversial issue; scholars have not reached an agreement on it. Cohen (2018: 31-32) affirms: "in my mind, the element of consciousness is what distinguishes strategies from processes that are not strategic. The element of choice is crucial because this is what gives a strategy its special character". Elsewhere he states:

> strategies can be classified as conscious mental activity. They must contain not only an action but a goal (or an intention) and a learning situation. Whereas a mental action might be subconscious, an action with a goal/intention and related to a learning situation can only be conscious (Cohen, 2007: 31)

However, some argue that, although the definition of strategy implies the concepts of intentionality and consciousness, with time some behaviours can become automatic and therefore unconscious. The same happens with language acquisition: "the learner tends to be consciously aware of rule applications during initial stages of acquisition and unaware of rules once proficiency has been achieved" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990: 79). Cohen himself (2007) surveyed 23 IPOLLS[12] participants, asking them for feedback on

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[12] International Project on Language Learner Strategies

learning strategy related issues. From the survey, a relative consensus emerged on the level of attention in the use of learning startegies, which was considered as "potentially fluctuating" :

> at the beginning of the process, the startegy might be at the center of attention, but as the plan is carried out, the stategy is reduced to peripheral attention then to a standby mode, and perhaps ultimately to a 'no attention' mode. So that would give this feature a potentially fluctuating nature, depending on the strategy being used by a given learner (Cohen, 2007: 33).

In other words, some felt that "various phases of strategy deployment could be at differning levels of consciousness" (Cohen, 2007: 33). However, there is a robust group of dissenting scholars (see also Rabinowitz and Chi, 1987) who argue that, since strategies are by definition conscious, when they become automatic they loose their strategic peculiarity: "once a process is automatic, it can no longer be a strategy since in this context 'automatic' means habitual and unconscious" (Cohen, 2007: 33). In this perspective, "when a *move* is no longer consciously selected, it is still a *process,* but […] no longer a *strategy*" (Cohen, 2018: 32).

Although it describes the skill acquisition process, Anderson's model might be useful to understand the proceduralization of learning strategies as well. According to the scholar, it is a three-stage process. It begins with the cognitive stage: the learner is instructed on the task to carry out and starts figuring out which language rules to exploit. Then the associative stage follows. At this stage the declarative knowledge is turned into procedural knowledge; in other words, instructions are transformed into actual action, keeping the language rules in mind. With time and practice, learners become fluent and start communicating automatically, with little effort and, without overthinking about language rules before speaking. The use of learning strategies may facilitate the skill acquisition process. According to Weinstein and Mayer (1986: 315) language strategies affect "the way in which the learner selects, acquires, organizes, or integrates new knowledge" having facilitation as a goal. Moreover, according to O'Malley & Chamot (1990: 85), learning strategies follow these stages like other cognitive skills they "begin as declarative knowledge that can become proceduralized with practice […]. At the cognitive stage, the strategy application is still based on declarative knowledge, requires processing in the short-term memory, and is not performed automatically".

Whether learners use learning strategies consciously or not, what is sure it that the use of learning strategies implies a certain degree of language awareness of the learning

process, which constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for learning autonomy. As Cotterall (2000: 112) states: "the potential for autonomy increases as an individual's awareness grows". By consequence, it seems reasonable to try to raise in learners such awareness, to make them aware of learning strategies. According to many scholars learning strategies should be integrated into language teaching (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Cohen, 2007; Hamilton, 2013). "The premise of learner training is to furnish learners with strategies and the confidence to embrace increased responsibility, preparing them for independence, focusing their attention on the process of learning, with an emphasis on *how* rather than *what* to learn" (Hamilton, 2013: 27). So, many agree that students should be given not only tasks to accomplish, but also tools to do so; in other words, strategies should be overtly taught in modern classes. For instance, IPOLLS experts surveyed by Cohen (2007) agreed on the necessity of explaining students the positive effects of the learning strategies' use: "the majority agreed that included in a description of a strategy would be its potential for leading to learning even if only expressed at the level of an hypothesis" (Cohen, 2007: 36). So, while considering a particular strategy and presenting it to students it must be made clear how doing the action would lead to enhance language learning: "several even felt that it was 'vital' to specify the relations between a certain strategy and its consequences in learning" (Cohen, 2007: 36); learners, indeed, "learn best in an environment where students are supported, where goals are shared, and where strategic activity is transparent" (Takeuchi, Griffiths, & Coyle, 2007: 92). To this extent, the teaching practice was integrated with instructions on learning strategies. All Strategy Based Instruction (SBI) models share four common steps (Chamot, 1999):

1 finding out what learning startegies students use;

2 practicing learning strategies together with learning tasks;

3 explaining how to use each strategy;

4 modeling strategies for the learners.

Once learning strategies are provided, explained, exemplified, and students become more familiar with them, they can freely choose the strategies they prefer. Teacher should encourage students to build their own learning strategies repertoire (Rubin et al., 2007). When students learn "how to use effective strategies for language learning tasks, they begin to be self-regulated learners […] and seek opportunities for indipendent learning" (Chamot, 1999: 53).

Therefore, the aim is not simply acquiring notions but making use of useful learning strategies, which drive the student towards autonomy. As explained below, the two goals "learning to learn" and "learning to know" involve:

1. the improvement of abilities such as concentration, memory, though;

2. the capacity of getting engaged both in problem solving activities and in abstract reasoning processes;

3. the ability of combining both inductive and deductive reasoning processes, often considered opposite rather than complementary;

4. the aware choose of cognitive procedures which differ according to unique contexts and contents;

5. the capacity of constantly monitoring one's own learning processes and way of thinking, together with the possibility of defining configuration which facilitate the learning process (Musello, 2005: 38) [13].

Despite the clear advantages of choosing strategy-based instruction and of overtly teaching learning strategies to facilitate students in their path towards autonomy in learning, many teachers still refuse such approach and prefer more traditional methods. In Chapter 3 a survey will be presented, which was conducted with the aim of investigating the degree of learning strategy-based instruction and that of learning strategy use on the part of some Calabrian high-school students.

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[13] my translation

Chapter 3

Case study of the language learning strategy use

3.1 Aims and methods of the study

In order to have some idea about the current learning methods of English as foreign language in Reggio Calabria and on the use of language learning strategies by students, I decided to survey a representative group of high school students. Indeed, among the aims of the study there were:

♦ investigating the most widely used strategies by students;

♦ identifying students' strengths and/or weaknesses;

♦ understanding the emotional state linked to English language learning;

♦ having an idea of the degree of their learning autonomy;

♦ trying to have an idea of their degree of motivation.

Students were surveyed by means of a questionnaire (see Appendix), accompanied by a letter of introduction to the study and a description and explanation of the questionnaire itself. All the data has been collected anonymously, in respect of the privacy norms in place and after having received the written consent from the school director. Students were asked about their age, language level, number of years spent studying English, but not their names.

The questionnaire I created is written in Italian, made up of 15 questions, divided into 8 sections:

1. Vocabulary learning

2. Grammar learning

3. Listening comprehension

4. Reading

5. Speaking

6. Writing

7. In class with the teacher

8. Other aspects.

Many of the questions are adapted from Oxford's (1989) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). There are three kinds of questions: multiple choice questions, questions which ask for free answers, questions which ask students to indicate the frequency with which they engage determined activities on a Likert scale, from 1 to 5. In Applied Linguistic research questionnaire has become a popular research instrument. Questionnaires are convenient in terms of time (for a huge amount of information can be collected in a few minutes), and versatile (because they can be used with a variety of people and they can investigate a variety of topics). A combination of both multiple-choice questions and open-ended items is recommended: the former are particularly suited to quantitative analysis (statistical analysis); the latter enable a qualitative analysis, because they allow answers which could be creative and rich in content (Dörnyei, 2010). The first and second questions concern vocabulary and grammar learning respectively and involve multiple choices questions: here I ask students to cross the actions they engage to learn new vocabularies and new grammar rules.

As concerns listening comprehension, I formulated the third question with the aim of discovering their attitude towards what they listen to: if they prefer gaining the general meaning or if, on the contrary, they focus on details while they make listening exercises. Ellis & Sinclair (1989: 58) have argued that: "a good listener varies his or her listening strategy according to *why* he or she is listening". In addition, I ask students if they do listening exercises at home, on their own. Similarly, I also ask them if they practice their English outside of school: if they talk to someone in English; if they have friends they text in English; if they use Web 2.0 tools; if they do writing exercises independently or if, on the contrary, they merely do their homework.

As concerns the use of Web 2.0 tools, since Web 2.0 tools appear to stimulate curiosity, to make students feel more comfortable than face-to-face interactions, to raise motivation and finally to foster autonomy in learning, in a nutshell, to have beneficial effects on language learning, I ask students if they have ever downloaded applications for English learning, if they currently follow English speaking youtubers/influencers, if they listen to music in English or if they watch English series with English subtitles. As stressed in Chapter 2, indeed, e-learning has several advantages, such as: the

individualization of the teaching process, self-pacing, interactivity, evaluation, engagement, availability (Pichiassi, 1999). In addition, e-learning: enhances communication and collaboration (Shahrokni et al., 2020); stimulates creativity (Levy & Stockwell, 2006); and lessens stress and anxiety (Lam, 2004).

In order to investigate their emotional state and the feelings associated to English learning, I ask them to indicate (on a scale from 1 to 5) how often they feel nervous while they do English listening exercises and when they speak English. I also ask them to indicate whether they accept being overtly corrected by teachers or if, on the contrary, they feel embarrassed when corrected in front of their fellow students. As stressed several times in this dissertation, in both the previous chapters, feelings and emotions have indeed a noteworthy influence on learning (Krashen, 1895), especially on foreign language learning, which many students find particularly agitating (Horwitz & Young, 1986). Furthermore, to collect additional information on their attitude towards the language, I explicitly ask them to indicate whether they like the language or not and it they find it potentially useful, motivating their answers. This is a fundamental aspect of language learning, because it generates motivation. As explained by Ryan and Deci (2000), when a learner does something because of the enjoyment that derives from it, because it is satisfying, engaging, involving and brings pleasure, then the speaker is intrinsically motivated. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (the latter raised by a specific goal in mind, such as gaining a qualification, getting a job, academic success) will lead to success when they are self-determined; on the contrary, when extrinsic motivation is either externally imposed or regulated by others, then it will not result in long-lasting benefits (Deci & Flaste, 1996) (see section 1.2.6).

In section number 5 of the questionnaire, using the same scale of frequency adopted in the listening comprehension and speaking sections, I ask students to rate the frequency of the actions they engage in while they read a text (such as reading the title; looking at pictures carefully; reading questions linked to the text before the content of the text itself; reading the glossary; and so on...). In addition, I ask them about their difficulties, their weaknesses in learning English, asking them to indicate the field in which they have most difficulty (vocabulary learning, grammar learning, listening, reading, speaking).

One crucial question belonging to section 7 (in class with the teacher) is where students are asked if their teacher has ever suggested to them any "tricks" to learn English

better, in other words, to be better learners. This question was formulated with clear aims in mind: understanding if students have been explicitly instructed on language learning strategies and understanding something about the students' degree of awareness of language learning strategy' use.

3.2 Participants

To achieve this aim, I surveyed a sample high-school student in Reggio Calabria, attending the High Schools "Don Luigi Nostro" (a "liceo") and "Leonida Repaci" (a technical institute), which were merged in 2012 into a single Institute, called today "Nostro-Repaci". I asked the school director for permission to survey 150 students, but since nine of them were absent on that days, I managed to collect 141 answered questionnaires. I chose that school because of the sizable amount of specializations it is made up of. The school, indeed, includes eight different specializations: human sciences ("liceo delle scienze umane"[14]); human sciences and economics ("liceo delle scienze umane-opzione economic-sociale[15]); classical studies ("liceo classico"[16]); scientific studies ("liceo scientifico"[17]); applied sciences ("liceo scientifico-opzione scienze applicate[18]"); sport sciences ("liceo scientifico-indirizzo sportivo"[19]); language studies ("liceo linguistico"[20]), technical institute ("istituto tecnico"[21]). First of all, for reasons of ease of speech and clarity of analysis, I have grouped the several specializations into more general groups, following a criterion of analogy of subjects studied and fields of interests. This operation led to the following groups: a group of human sciences' students (30 students); scientific studies' group (46 students); a group of foreign languages students (35 students); a group of vocational students (30 students).

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[14] devoted to the humanities, in particular pedagogy, anthropology, psychology, sociology.

[15] devoted to both humanities and economics.

[16] devoted to the humanities, with Latin, Greek, Italian, history and philosophy as principal subjects.

[17] devoted to scientific studies, with mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology as principal subjects.

[18] devoted to scientific studies, in particular earth science and computer science.

[19] devoted to scientific studies, in particular motor sciences.

[20] devoted to modern foreign languages learning.

[21] devoted to economics, business management, ITC.

1. Human sciences;

2. Human sciences and economics;

3. Classical studies;

Human sciences group

4. Scientific studies;

5. Applied sciences;

6. Sport sciences;

Scientific studies group

7. Language studies;

→ Foreign language group

8. Technical institute.

→ Vocational studies group

Groups of study

Human sciences group 21%

Foreign language group 25%

Vocational studies group 21%

Scientific studies group 33%

- Foreign language group
- Scientific studies group
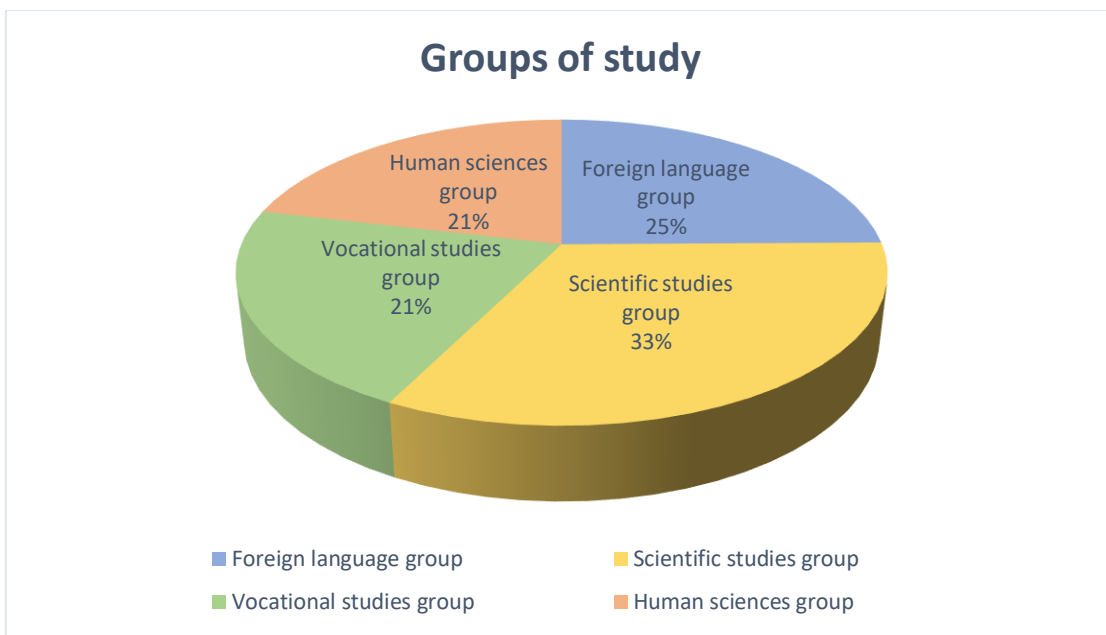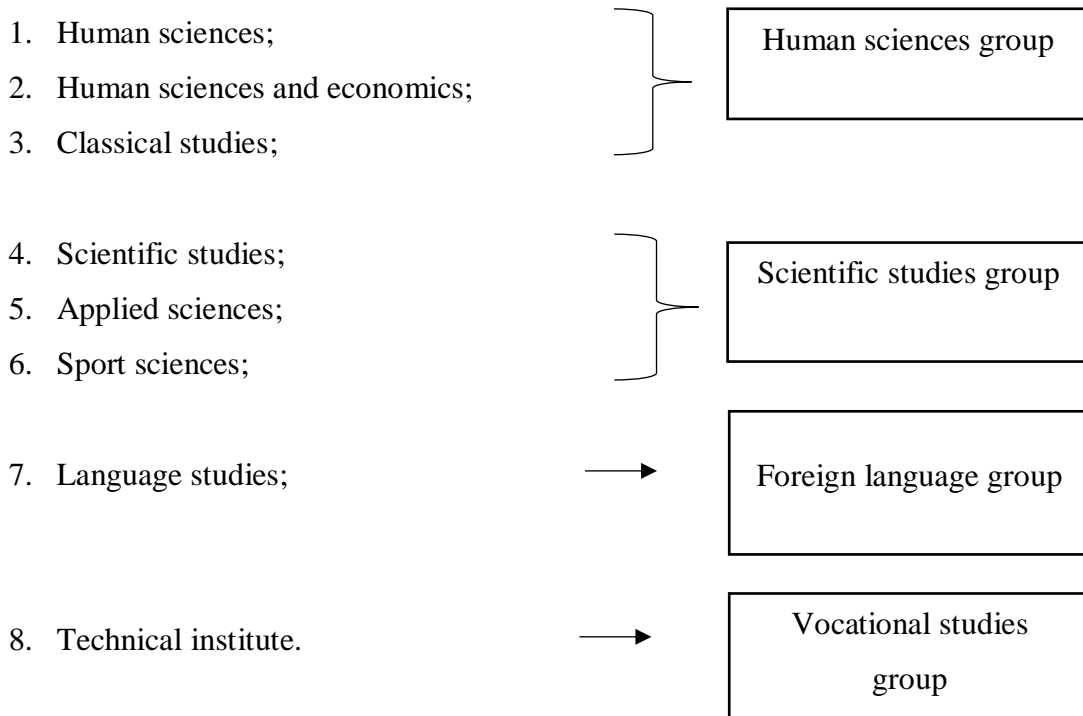- Vocational studies group
- Human sciences group

Figure 22- Groups of study
Source: Case study, 2020

The participants in the questionnaire are aged from 15 to 18 years old (hence an average of 16.5 years old) belonging to twelve classes. They declare that they have spent from 6 up to 15 years studying English, for an overall average of 11.7 years. As concerns

their linguistic level, they are asked to assess it on the basis of the classification provided by the Common European Framework Reference for Languages (see section 1.3.3.2). 29.8% declare to have a B2 level; 7.1 % declare an A2 level; 6.4% a B2 level; 1 (out of 141, hence 0.7%) declares an A1 and another 0.7% declares to possess a C1 level. However, a sizeable group of participants, which constitute more than a half of the sample (55.3%) are not able to assess themselves and indicate their current language level. When asked why they had left the space blank, some of them answered they did not know the language level standard classification, while others were not able to self-assess their skills. For this reason, they did not fill in the space. Although (as previously stressed in section 1.3.3.2 of Chapter 1) the framework of reference developed by the Council of Europe provides learners with a useful means for language self-assessment, still there are students who either are unaware of its existence or who do not know how to exploit it. In Table 2, to refer to this group I used the acronym "N.D.", meaning they were "not declaring" students.

Declared Linguistic Levels

Level	No.	%
Total	141	100
A1	1	0.7
A2	10	7.1
B1	42	29.8
B2	9	6.4
C1	1	0.7
N.D.	78	55.3

Table 2- Assessment of participants' linguistic levels.
Source: Case study, 2020

For a more detailed analysis, I have further grouped answers on language levels according to the groups mentioned above:

	Foreign language group		Human sciences group		Scientific studies group		Vocational studies group	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Tot.	35	100	30	100	46	100	30	100
A1	0	0	0	0	1	2.2	0	0
A2	2	5.7	1	3.3	5	10,9	2	6.7
B1	21	60	6	20	10	21.7	5	16.7
B2	3	8.6	2	6.7	3	6.5	1	3.3
C1	0	0	0	0	1	2.2	0	0
N.D.	9	25.7	21	70	26	56.5	22	73.3

Table 3- Assessment of participants' linguistic levels: division per group.
Source: Case study, 2020

Analysing the answers, it emerges that, for example, 73.3% of the vocational studies group students, together with the 70% of students belonging to the human sciences group and 56.5% of scientific studies students are not able to assess their level. The highest percentage of students who are able to assess their linguistic level belongs to the foreign language group, which reaches 74.3% of students assessing their level. In particular, 60% of them declare a B1 level. I have presented the personal information declared by participants, again, collected anonymously. Let us now turn to the data emerging from the analysis of the answers to the questionnaire.

3.3 Data analysis and findings

3.3.1 Vocabulary learning

In section 1 of the questionnaire I ask students the following question: "What do you do to learn a new word?", which aims at collecting data on the actions adopted by students to learn vocabulary.

1. Vocabulary learning		
Question: "What do you do to learn a new word?"		
	No.	%
I repeat/write the word several times.	58	41.1
I write words in a glossary.	50	35.5
I think of relationships between the new word and what I already know.	49	34.7
I put the new word within a sentence, so I can remember it.	43	30.5
I link the word's sound to an image.	22	15.6
I use rhymes.	2	1.4
I use an application for smartphone.	21	14.8
Other…*	3	2
*If you do something which has not been mentioned, please write it here		

Table 4- Results on vocabulary learning strategies' use.
Source: Case study, 2020

The highest number of respondents indicate that they adopt the following practices: repeating/writing the word several times (41.1%); writing words in a glossary (35.5%); thinking of relationships between new word and background knowledge (34.7%). A very few students say that they use an application for smartphones to extend their vocabulary, 14.8% to be precise. The great majority of respondents (17 out of 21), indeed, give Google Translate as example. However, it is my opinion that Google Translate can certainly be used to translate words, but I am not sure it this could be considered a true application to extend vocabulary. On the basis of these last considerations, I would say that, of a total of 141 students, only 4 of them (2.8%) use true applications to extend vocabulary, such as Duolingo (indicated by 3 respondents) and Elevate (indicated by 1 respondent).

As concerns the use of visual support, it is among the lowest rated activities, although some statistics show that sight supports memory. Indeed, "human beings perceive informative messages, in average, at the 83% through the sight, at 11% with the hearing, at the 3.5% with the sense of smell, at the 1.5% with the touch and at the 1% through the taste" (Pichiassi, 1999: 138). For this reason, Oxford (1990) lists the use of images and sound within the memory strategy' group. Despite that, only 15.6% say that they link the word's sound to an image. As represented in Table 5, the answers provided by the group of scientific studies (26%) are slightly above the average, while the least visual learners seem to be the students belonging to the foreign language group.

1. Vocabulary learning									
Question: **"What do you do to learn a new word?"**									
	Foreign language group		Human sciences group		Scientific studies group		Vocational studies group		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
	35	100	30	100	46	100	30	100	141	100
I repeat/write the word several times.	17	48.6	15	50	14	30.4	12	40	58	41.1
I write words in a glossary.	10	28.6	15	50	18	39.1	7	23.3	50	35.5
I think of relationships between the new word and what I already know.	17	48.6	9	30	15	32.6	8	26.7	49	34.7
I put the new word within a sentence, so I can remember it.	12	34.3	7	23.3	15	32.6	9	30	43	30.5
I link the word's sound to an image.	3	8.6	3	10	12	26	4	13.3	22	15.6
I use rhymes.	0		0	0	1	2.2	1	3.3	2	1.4
I use an application for smartphone.	1	2.9	3	10	11	23.9	6	20	21	14.8
Other*…	1	2.9	0	0			2		3	2

*If you do something which has not been mentioned, please write it here

Table 5- Results on vocabulary learning strategies' use divided per group of study.
Source: Case study, 2020

3.3.2 Grammar learning

2. Grammar learning		
Question: "How do you prefer learning grammar rules?"		
	No.	%
I memorize the rule.	20	14.2
First I learn the rule, then I do the exercises.	96	68.1
I do exercises first. I check rules if I do not know/remember them.	42	29.8
Once I have learned the rule, I look for it in a new text.	40	28.3
I write words in a notebook.	46	32.6
I ask the teacher for help if a rule is not clear.	48	34
I does not matter if I do not understand all the rules.	5	3.5
Other...*	0	0

*If you do something which has not been mentioned, please write it here

Table 6- Results on grammar learning strategies' use.
Source: Case study, 2020

Section 2 of the questionnaire is intended to collect information on how grammar is learned. Table 6 represents the overall average, while Table 7 shows answers sorted per

group of study. From the analysis of the collected data it emerges that 68.1% of respondents learn grammar rules first and then do exercises, while 29.8% of respondents say they do exercises first and to check grammar rules only in case of doubts. 3.5% of students say that it does not matter if they do not manage to learn all the rules. As concerns the learning strategies adopted to learn grammar, 32.6% of students employ a notebook; 28.3% of students look for the new rule in the text, after they have learned it. As concerns this last statement, the average of the scientific studies group declaring they do so is evidently higher than the overall average: it reaches 67.4%, against 6.7% of the vocational studies group and 8.6% of the foreign language group.

2. Grammar learning Question: **"What do you do to learn grammar rules?"**									
	Foreign language group		Human sciences group		Scientific studies group		Vocational studies group		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
	35	100	30	100	46	100	30	100	141	100
I memorize the rule.	4	11.4	5	16.6	4	8.7	7	23.3	20	14.2
First I learn the rule, then I do the exercises.	23	65.7	23	76.6	34	73.9	16	53.3	96	68.1
I do exercises first. I check rules if I do not know/remember them.	12	34.3	6	20	13	28.2	11	36.7	42	29.8
Once I have learned the rule, I look for it in a new text.	3	8.6	4	13.3	31	67.4	2	6.7	40	28.3
I write rules in a notebook.	17	48.6	13	43.3	8	17.4	8	26.7	46	32.6
I ask the teacher for help if a rule is not clear.	18	51.4	11	36.6	13	28.2	6	20	48	34
I does not matter if I do not understand all the rules.	1	2.9	1	3.3	1	2.2	2	6.7	5	3.5
Other* …	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*If you do something which has not been mentioned, please write it here

Table 7- Results on grammar learning strategy use. Source: Case study, 2020

Only 3.5% of respondents do not judge it necessary to understand every single rule: however, they still perceive the importance of grammar learning. After all (re-proposing a definition already quoted in Chapter 1 "language *without* grammar would certainly leave us seriously handicapped […] language without grammar would be chaotic:

countless words without the indispensable guidelines for how they can be ordered and modified" (Batstone, 1994: 3-4). However, despite the fact that I have asked them to indicate the eventual other personal strategies they adopt to learn grammar rules more efficiently, none of them has filled the space.
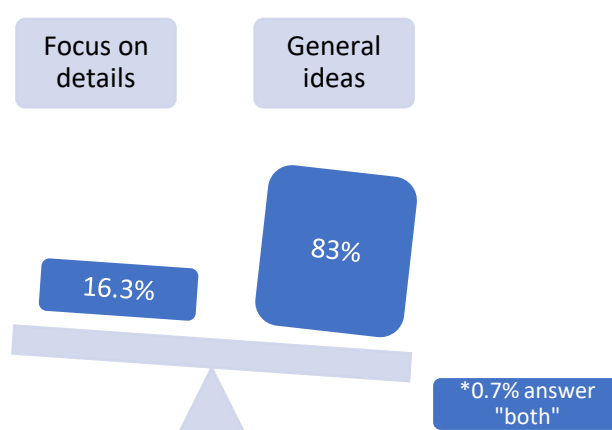
3.3.3 Listening comprehension

Figure 13- Results on listening comprehension exercises.
Source: Case study, 2020

As concerns the listening comprehension exercises, the results are clear: 83% of respondents say they try to find out the general ideas expressed by the dialogues they listen to, instead on focusing on details. However, Ellis & Sinclair (1989: 58) have argued: "a good listener varies his or her listening strategy according to *why* he or she is listening. Having a reason for listening helps you to focus on what you need or want to listen for". Yet only 1 respondent claimed to vary his/her listening attitude on the basis of what the listening exercise requires.

In order to have an idea of their degree of autonomy in learning, I asked them what kind of listening exercises they do at home, providing them with some examples, such as listening to music, or watching television series. The former activity proves to be the most frequently chosen by students. The vast majority say they to listen to English music at home (79.4%). Although I expected to find a high percentage of students watching television series in English (they seem to be really in vogue among teenagers) the activity related to television series was chosen only by half of them. In addition, 40 of them watch

television series with English subtitles, while the other 33 prefer subtitles in Italian. In particular, analysing the data belonging to the students of the foreign language group, it emerged that 42.8% choose English subtitles, 28.6% choose Italian subtitles, and another 28.6% do not watch television series in English.

3. Listening activities Question: **"What kind of listening exercises do you do at home?"**										
	Foreign language group		Human sciences group		Scientific studies group		Vocational studies group		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
	35	100	30	100	46	100	30	100	141	100
I listening to music.	31	88.6	27	90	32	69.5	22	73.3	112	79.4
I watch tv series in English with: … …English subtitles. …Italian subtitles.	15 10	42.8 28.6	4 9	13.3 30	12 10	26 21.7	9 4	30 13.3	40 33	28.3 23.4
I follow youtubers, who post videos in English.	11	31.4	7	23.3	13	28.2	8	26.7	39	27.6
I do not do any listening exercises at home.	2	5.7	2	6.6	8	17.4	5	16.7	17	12

Table 8- Results on vocabulary learning strategies' use.
Source: Case study, 2020

Similar to the overall average linked to the television series is that concerning another Web 2.0 tool: youtube. A number of respondents, 27.6% claim to follow youtubers/influencers/make-up artists who post English videos online, such as: Vsauce, PewDiePie, Davie 504, Lele Pons. As highlighted in Chapter 2, the Web 2.0 is a potential source of stimuli and support to language learning, since it involves learners and stimulates curiosity.

3.3.4 Speaking

♦ Question: "Do you speak English outside of school? If yes, how and with whom?"

52.5% answered that they speak English outside school. They answer the question "How and with whom?" by saying that they are in touch via social media and thanks to videogames, which allow them to use English as a lingua franca to communicate with people from other countries. However, it is to be considered that a considerable number of respondents say they use English at the British School, which is still another kind of school environment.

3.3.5 Reading

In Table 9 I report the average frequency of use of strategies linked to reading comprehension. In this section I used the Likert scale -employed by Oxford (1989) in her SILL- asking students to indicate a number from 1 to 5 (where 1 means "never" and 5 means "always") on the basis of the frequency of use of the specific strategy.

I provided students with the Italian translation of the following legend:

1 = Never	2 = Seldom	3 = Sometimes	4 = Often	5 = Always

I read the title first.	4.4
I try to understand from the title what the text is about.	4
I look carefully at the illustrations (if there are any) to understand what the text could be about.	3.5
Before reading the text, first I read the questions related to it.	3.2
I try to get the main ideas conveyed by the text.	4
I stop every time I do not know a word.	3.6
I skip unknown words.	2.3
I use side-glossary (if any).	3.9
I re-read the same portions of text or the same words several times.	3.4
I underline the main information.	3.4
I translate word-for-word.	2.9
Instead of immediately looking up for a word in the dictionary, I first try to get the meaning from the context.	3.5

Table 9- Results on reading strategies' use.
Source: Case study, 2020

Activities with a high average frequency of use are: reading the title; trying to forecast the content from both its title and from the possible pictures; trying to infer meaning from the context and from the illustrations (if any). These activities have a high average of use, either equal or superior to 3.5. In addition, the average frequency of use of the side-glossary is also quite high: 3.9. Although students say they stop very often when they do not know a word (average frequency of use: 3.6), in general it can be stated that the students interviewed are good readers. Reading, after all, is not indicated by students among the main areas of difficulty (see section 3.3.8)

3.3.6 Writing

Writing is perhaps not explicitly practiced by this sample of students, in the sense that they engage in determined strategies not considering them pedagogical. Let us now analyse the data about writing skills.

6. Writing									
	Foreign language group		Human sciences group		Scientific studies group		Vocational studies group		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No	%
	35	100	30	100	46	100	30	100	141	100
I do homework only.	18	51.4	22	73.3	30	65.2	22	73.3	92	65.2
I do extra exercises.	17	48.6	8	26.7	16	34.8	8	26.7	49	34.8
I text a friend in English.	16	45.7	12	40	12	26	6	20	46	32.6

Table 10- Results on writing strategies' use.
Source: Case study, 2020

In general, 65.2% say they do only homework, and while analysing data more closely, it emerges that the majority of the vocational studies (73.3%) only do homework. Like the vocational studies group, the human sciences students also declare they to do only homework; however, some of them, although only 46 out of 141, text friends in English, which is surely a good way of skill training. As stated in the previous chapters (see section 1.1.2 and 2.4.2), indeed, interaction with other interlocutors (either in written or oral form) is necessary to develop communicative competence. In particular, if the learners

establish relationships with more capable others, this will be for sure a great advantage for them. A high percentage of foreign language students both do extra writing exercises and text someone in English: many claimed to text even people met online, so not only true "friends", but people belonging to chat communities. In addition, some respondents who play videogames answer that they speak English with other players. The recent literature, indeed (see Kioumarsi, 2018 and Alizadeh, 2019 in section 2.2.1) stresses the huge potentiality of MMOGs (massively multiplayer online games).

3.3.7 In class with the teacher

In order to have an idea of the kind of instruction they have received on learning strategies. I asked students the following question:

♦ "Has your teacher ever suggested you any trick to learn English better? If yes, which one?"

	Foreign language group		Human sciences group		Scientific studies group		Vocational studies group		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No	%
	35	100	30	100	46	100	30	100	141	100
No	13	37.1	16	53.3	31	67.4	18	60	92	55.3
Yes	22	62.9	14	46.7	15	32.6	12	40	49	44.7
With examples: …	18	51.4	14	46.7	13	28.3	11	36.7	46	39.7

Table- 11: Results on strategy-based instruction's experience
Source: Case study, 2020

78 (out of 141) students answered "No", 55.3 %. Although the other 63 (44.7 %) respondents answered "Yes" to the question, 7 of them were not able to provide the required examples. In other words, the overall average of students answering "Yes" and giving at least one example correspond to 39.7%. The average resulting from the foreign language students' group is slightly higher than the overall percentage: it is the 51.4 %. Among the latter there are:

1. Watching videos/movies/dialogues in English (indicated by 20 respondents);

2. Listening to English music (indicated by 5 students);

3. Putting words within sentences (indicated by 5 students);

4. Repeating the word to learn several times (indicated by 3 students).

In addition, it emerges that, even within the same classes, answers are contrasting. There are both respondents "yes" and respondents "no".

3.3.8 Affective dimension, attitudes and other aspects

3.3.8.1 Affective dimension

As previously explained in section 3 of this Chapter, another aim of my study was that of gathering some information about feelings and emotion related to the English language, such as how students feel about both listening to/ speaking English, since the literature reviewed stresses the decisive influence of feeling on language learning in general and in foreign language learning in particular (Krashen, 1985; Horwitz & Young, 1986), as discussed in section 1.2 of Chapter 1, and 2.2.1 and 2.4.2 of Chapter 2. For this reason, I asked them to express how often they feel nervous when they listen to English by circling a number from 1 to 5, using as a reference the same Likert scale adopted in the section devoted to the use of reading comprehension related strategies, where, once again, 1 stands for "Never" and 5 for "Always".
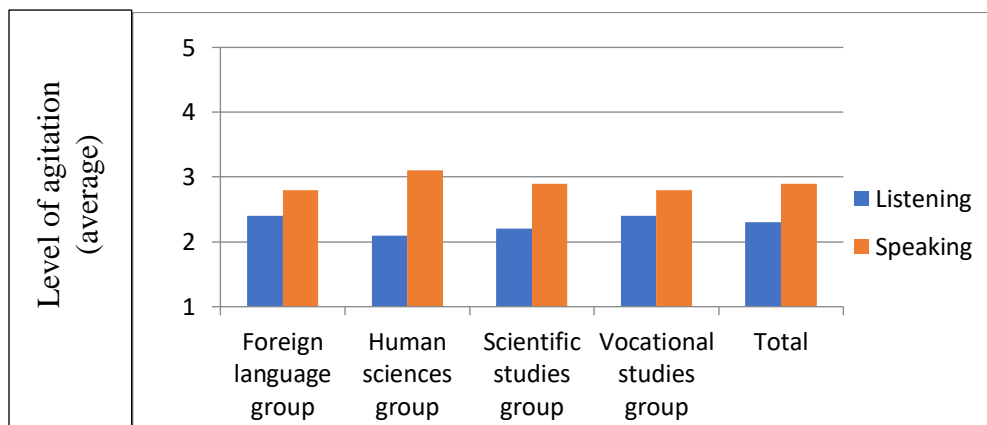

Figure 14- Comparison of the levels of agitation during listening and speaking exercises.
Source: Case study, 2020

Let us look at the percentages: the overall average of agitation linked to listening comprehension is medium/low: 2.3, meaning that usually students are sometimes/rarely agitated when they listen to English. I have further calculated the median rates of each group of study: 2.4 is the median rate of the foreign language group; 2.1 the median rate

of the human sciences group; 2.2 and 2.4 are the median rates of the results collected from the scientific sciences group and the vocational studies group respectively.

The overall average of frequency of agitation linked to speaking is medium: 2.9. In particular, the average of the answers provided by the students of the foreign language group is 2.8; that resulting from human sciences group students is 3.1; 2.2 for the scientific studies group and 2.8 for the vocational studies group. In the bar chart present in Figure 14 the results deriving from the two areas are compared: it emerges that students are slightly more agitated when during speaking activities rather than during the listening comprehension exercises.

Another question posed with the aim of collecting information on the affective dimension is the following:

- ♦ Question: "Do you feel uncomfortable when the teacher corrects you in front of your classmates when you make a mistake?"

The majority of respondents (83%) do not feel uncomfortable when explicitly corrected by teachers. They explain, indeed, that it is possible to learn from one's own mistakes and answer using the typical Italian idiomatic expression "sbagliando si impara". In addition, they find it natural to make mistakes and an overt correction by the teacher can also give other students the chance of learning something (59.6% take note of corrections). The rest percentage of students (17%) declare they feel uncomfortable when corrected in front of their fellow students. They confess they are either particularly shy; have a low self-esteem and feel inferior when the teacher stresses their mistakes; they are afraid of being judged by their classmates, who sometimes even take fun of them.

Analysing the results per group, it emerges that, while three groups have a similar median rate, foreign language students have an average which is slightly higher than the others. Is it because, as English is their specialization, they do not want to disappoint other people's expectations? But this consideration is merely speculative. On the overall, the sample show a high degree of maturity in the given open answers. After all, it must be considered that the age ranges from 15 to 18 years old.

3.3.8.2 Personal attitude towards the language

- ♦ Question: "Do you enjoy studying English? Do you judge it useful for your future? Motivate your answers."

The 95% declare they consider English useful: either for their future jobs, for their future travels, for it is one of the most widely spoken languages in the word and its knowledge is becoming ever more fundamental. However, only 71.6% of students affirm they enjoy studying English. As consequence there exists a portion of students (although very low) who find English useful despite the fact they do not enjoy studying it.

3.3.8.3 Main difficulties

♦ Question: "Which fields do you find particularly difficult?"

Main difficulties										
	Foreign language group		Human sciences group		Scientific studies group		Vocational studies group		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
	35	100	30	100	46	100	30	100	141	100
Vocabulary learning	4	11.4	3	10	5	10.9	4	13.3	16	18.4
Grammar learning	11	31.4	11	36.6	7	15.2	9	30	38	26.9
Listening comprehension	11	31.4	10	33.3	26	56.5	6	20	53	37.6
Reading	0	0	5	16.6	3	6.5	0	0	8	5.7
Writing	6	17.1	3	10	5	10.9	4	13.3	18	12.7
Speaking	13	37.1	12	40	20	43.5	15	50	60	42.5

Table 12- Results on students' main difficulties
Source: Case study, 2020

From the answers it emerges that students' main difficulties are related to the fields of listening and speaking, indicated as problematic fields by 37.6% and 42.5% respectively, while writing and reading are less indicated as among the main difficult areas. In addition, having given students the chance of choosing more than one answer, it emerges that the 141 students give an average of 1.4 answers (so each student has indicated in average from 1 to 2 answers, crossing the area of linguistic study which they find most difficult). The average of answers given by the human sciences group (1.5) is slightly above the average. What is more, it emerges that none of the students belonging to both foreign language group and vocational studies group say that they have particular difficulties in reading comprehension.

3.4 Workshop on Language Learning Strategies

Since I wanted to put my studies in practice, I decided to conduct a workshop on strategy-based instruction, in order help those students who had difficulties in learning. For this reason, I decided to contact the director of the high school where I had collected the questionnaire data, but she did not show much interest in the workshop. For this reason, I introduced my plan to the director of an afterschool centre in Reggio Calabria, called "Associazione Serena", attended by low-motivated students, who have a low attention level, are not able (or willing) to do their homework alone, but rather prefer studying together with a supervisor.

3.4.1 Afterschool centre's participants in the workshop

Nine of the Afterschool center's learners agreed to participate in the workshop on language learning strategies. The nine participants had an average age of 13 years old. First of all, to have some information about their learning styles, I asked them to fill in the same questionnaire as that proposed to high school students (see section 3.1).

3.4.2 Data analysis

The differences were immediately clear: this time, as concerned vocabulary learning, the main action adopted was simply repeating words several times in order to remember them. As concerns reading comprehension, the most widely used action with a high average frequency of use was reading the title first (average frequency of use 3.8, on a Likert scale from 1 to 5). Five out of nine declared they listen to music in English. One out of nine said he plays videogames with international players. Nobody claimed to speak English at home. Nobody did extra-exercises; two out of nine said they had received advice from teachers about learning strategies, but were not able to give examples. In addition, many claimed to have serious difficulties in English; two of them chose all the language options provided. As concerns their emotions, the average frequency of agitation linked to listening comprehension was medium 2.8, while that related to speaking was 4, hence quite high.

As concerns the difficulty in language learning, all students showed not only a lack of knowledge, but also a lack of method: having a task to accomplish, they did not know

how to do it. In short, they did not appear to know how to learn. To help them and to put some theory into practice, I decided to lead a general workshop on strategy-based instruction and, after that, to supervise learners, suggesting to them how to exploit learning strategies.

3.4.1.1 Aims and methods of the study

The research questions of this study are the following:

♦ RQ1: "What is the reason for the learners' apparent lack of motivation?"

♦ RQ2: "Could language strategies actually help to make them more motivated?"

Answer 1 was soon clear: six learners out of nine (66.7%) claimed that they do not like studying English, either because they do not like the language itself, finding it too difficult, or because they do not have a good relationship with their English teacher. It is true that the relationship with the teacher can either positively or, on the contrary, negatively affect learning. It is a truth that involves not only foreign language learning but learning in general. As highlighted in Chapter 2, at section 2.3, negative past experiences may negatively affect learners' motivation, especially if learners are young (like in the case) and at their first experience with the subject: among such negative past experiences there are conflicts with teachers as well (Graham, 1994). Teachers' behaviour may, in other words, affect learners' attitude towards the subject they teach. For this reason, in Chapter 1 I stressed necessity of a positive classroom atmosphere, relaxing and pleasant but at the same time stimulating.

Then what I had to do was to try new strategies to stimulate their motivation. In order to do so, Oxford's (1990; 2001) works were illuminating. I gave six introductory lessons (for a total of 10 hours) making a presentation of learning strategies, hoping to help them to learn better, to become better language learners. I asked students to tell me their preferences and they said they wanted to begin with vocabulary learning. Since they were young learners, I suggested to them to use coloured flashcards, in order to associate words to pictures. As often underlined in both Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, visual representations are a useful support to language learning for they facilitate memory. In addition, coloured images are particularly appreciated by young learners. But learning vocabulary randomly

is not recommended. For this reason, during the learning phase, words were sorted according to the semantic field. I suggested that the students create their own notebook, always sorting vocabularies not according to initials, but according to the semantic field. I asked them to think about a topic (for example, they chose topics such as travelling, playing soccer and animals). Then we did some brainstorming in Italian, during which learners could all contribute to a preliminary lexical exploration of the topic. After having come up with many words associated to the specific field, I provided them with the English words, together with some useful sentences. Also, I suggested underlining vocabulary with different colours, the ones they liked the most, in order to distinguish nouns from verbs and from adjectives (for example red for verbs, blue for nouns, green for adjectives). As Oxford (1990: 89) suggests, one can emphasize something "through color, underlining, CAPITAL LETTERS, Initial Capitals, **BIG WRITING, bold writing,** stars, boxes, circles and so on. The sky's the limit in thinking of ways".

Another highly requested topic was grammar learning. As with vocabulary, I suggested that students summarize grammar rules in a workbook and write down an example for each rule. Exemplifying grammar rules through sentences is very important: remembering even a thousand rules but not knowing how to construct a sentence proves useless. Hence the necessity of practical examples which show how language works. As was stressed in section 1.3.3, learners' aim should be that of reaching communicative proficiency and accuracy, since "language learning comes about when the teacher gets learners to use the language pragmatically to mediate meaning for a purpose" (Widdowson, 1990: 160). In short, knowing a language means knowing how to use it.

> Obviously, a language course which consisted entirely of grammar to the detriment of communicative learning would not achieve this goal. But when grammar is given its proper place and taught in such a way that is does not overshadow other elements of language teaching, it is often welcomed by students […] (Bade, 2008: 182).

Since not only sight supports language learning, but sounds as well (Pichiassi, 1999), I tried to help students remember grammar examples through songs: for example I proposed to them *Santa Claus is coming to town* to learn the -ing form and *If I were a boy* to help them remember the 2rd conditional.

Santa Claus is coming to town   I'm telling you why
[…]   Santa Claus is coming to town

[…]

He's making a list

He's checking it twice

He's gonna find out

Who's naughty or nice

[…]

He sees you when you're sleeping

He knows when you're awake

[…]

If I were a boy

If I were a boy

I think I could understand

How it feels to love a girl

I swear I'd be a better man

If I were a boy

I'd listen to her

[…]

If I were a boy

I would turn off my phone

[I would] Tell everyone it's broken

So they'd think that I was sleeping alone

I'd put myself first. […]

In this way students not only learned grammar rules, but also practiced their listening comprehension. I also suggested them to practice their listening comprehension at home, listening to other songs in English.

For the students who had to learn paradigms, I suggested sorting verbs according to vowel changes (or analogy) rather than by alphabetical order. For example:

bring- brought- brought

buy- bought- bought

catch-caught-caught

break-broke-broken

choose-chose-chosen

speak-spoke-spoken

steal-stole-stolen

become-became-become

come-came-come

overcome-overcame-overcome

drink-drank-drunk

run-ran-run

sink-sank-sunk

swim-swam-swum

blow-blew-blown

draw-drew-drown

fly-flew-flown

show-shew-shown

build-built-built

burn-burnt-burnt

send-sent-sent

sleep-slept-slept

spend-spent-spent

stick-stuck-stuck

bet-bet-bet

cost-cost-cost

cut-cut-cut

put-put-put

set-set-set

For the students who had problems with the reading comprehension, I suggested using their background knowledge to understand new terms. For example, one student did not know the meaning of the noun "beauty". I suggested that he could think about the adjective "beautiful", which derives from it. By consequence, if beautiful can be translated in Italian with "bello", beauty can be translated with "bellezza". Similarly, if "border" is English for "confine", then it is easier to reach the conclusion that "to border" is English for "confinare".

As concerns the reading comprehension, I suggested them trying to infer the general meaning also from what is around the text: title, pictures, side-glossary. In particular, I suggested looking carefully at the images (if available) because images give useful hints on the topic at hand. If they have to answer to questions, it can be useful to read questions first, in order to an idea of the information to look for in the text. Since I did not want classes to be only passive, I sometimes asked them to repeat the learned vocabulary or to explain certain grammar rules (in Italian) to the fellow students; in other words, I ask them to be the teacher. Surprisingly, I noticed that such activities were very stimulating. Even the most unmotivated students, when asked to take control of the lesson, even if just for a while, they showed a great sense of responsibility. Such an activity proved to be extremely engaging and motivating.

The challenges were particularly motivating as well, leading students to do the best they could. I used to test students in groups, giving a point to the team who gave the right answer. Like this, cooperation and teamwork are stimulated as well. I think that such challenges could make language learning not only more enjoyable but also more engaging and motivating, making learners more active rather than just passive listening to lessons. Quizzes and tests could be useful to reinforce knowledge, recap on topics and improve knowledge retention. After the six introductory lessons, I helped students doing their homework a couple of times per week for a month, suggesting them to use learning strategies learned during the workshop. Although the time spent together was relatively short, I noticed a change of approach and attitude towards English learning.

3.4 Conclusive remarks on case study and workshop

First of all, it is necessary to underline that as considerations and remarks are only limited to the sample surveyed, this study does not aim at providing universal working truths or conclusions, but only conclusions on the basis of the collected results. The research questions of this study at the beginning of the inquiry were mainly:

♦ RQ1: "Do students have any experience of Language Learning Strategies?"

♦ RQ2: "How could they be made more aware of Language Learning Strategies?"

I created the above-mentioned questionnaire (see Appendix) in order to collect data useful to answer to the first research question.

To sum up, from the questionnaire administrated to the high school students, it emerges that the overall average of students find from 1 to 2 linguistic fields particularly difficult. The average of given answers is in fact of 1.4. In particular the two linguistic fields they find most difficult to deal with are: speaking and listening comprehension, as declared by 42.5% the and 37.6% of respondents. Since the literature reviewed (and introduced in the previous chapters), departing from Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis to more recent studies (Gkonou, 2018) highlights the negative influence of anxiety, stress, agitation on language learning, I asked students to rate the frequency of agitation linked to these two aspects. Results show a medium average frequency of agitation linked to speaking and a medium-low average frequency of agitation linked to listening comprehension exercises. However, although these tiny differences, I would assume that the sample of high school students surveyed has managed, during the years spent learning English and by gaining confidence with the language, to control quite well their levels of agitation. For this reason, the reason for the difficulties declared in the areas of speaking and listening (which will be later analysed) cannot be entirely related to the levels of agitation, since they are either medium or medium/low. In addition, the 83% of respondents do not feel uncomfortable if corrected in front of classmates.

I think that the difficulty related to these aspects is that maybe students do not practice such skills enough. For example, 12% do not do any listening activities at home; and except listening to music, which is a particularly highly used activity by all respondents, only 33 out (of 141) watch tv series with English subtitles, while 40 prefer Italian subtitles and the other 68 students do not watch television series in English (48.2%), although I expected English television series to be particularly in vogue among teenagers. A number of students say that they follow English speaking youtubers/influencers/make-up artists who post videos in English; however, they are 39 out of 141, a sign that the Web 2.0 tools have a potential usefulness as language learning support, which not all students exploit. As for their speaking skills, almost a half of the respondents do not speak English at home (the majority

of those students declaring they English outside school attend the British Institute or another private school).

The other linguistic fields did not prove to be particularly difficult. The lowest rated was the reading comprehension. In the light of results, I would say that the students interviewed are good language readers, or at least they are good guessers: indeed, the overall average frequency of use of reading strategies is quite high: this means that students are aware of reading strategies and exploit them when possible. A high percentage of them, indeed, declare they try to use a side-glossary, to infer meaning from title, from pictures, from the context, from what is at their disposal.

I have to admit I expected the foreign language group of students to be more engaged in autonomous language learning activities than the others. In some fields there was a considerable difference, in others it was very slight: for example, 51.4% speak of doing only homework and only a half of them remember examples of language learning strategies suggested by teachers. Even within the foreign language group of students there are some respondents who are not able to assess their level (although only 9 out of them and in a definitely low percentage- 25.7%- with respect to other groups).

As concerns the students' attitude towards English, although the 95% of students find English useful, no activity adopted by students at home has the same high percentage. It means that there is potential motivation (together with 71.6% declaring they enjoy the language) however, it is not high. As discussed in the pages of this thesis devoted to the intricate concept of motivation (see section 2.3) motivated learners are those who demonstrate perseverance and persistence "during the lengthy and often tedious process of mastering a foreign/second language (L2)" (Dörnyei, 2001: 5), so even the best intentions must be constantly sustained and always kept alive. As suggested already suggested in Chapter 2, there are actions that can be adopted first of all by students, to motivate themselves, and in addition by teachers, to enhance students' motivation. Clearly, motivation cannot be externally imposed: teachers cannot force their students to be interested in the taught subject. On the contrary, what they can do is to stimulate such motivation and to facilitate the acquisitional process, as far as they can (see section 2.3). Motivational strategies, then, could be a support to the affective dimension of foreign language learning, as suggested in the previous chapter, together with the integration of Web 2.0 tools which offer "new channels to use the target language outside the classroom" (Bailey et al., 2017: 13) and which could prove to be very engaging, motivating and stimulating. As concerns the Afterschool centre learners and their lack of motivation, in the

light of the workshop results, I would infer that, to some extent, it could be due the use at school of the traditional grammar-based method, which does not prove to be particularly motivating.

In conclusion, to answer the initial research questions, many students do have experience of many language learning strategies. However, results show that still many students do not fully exploit the tools at their disposal. In particular, considering the age of participants (from 15 to 18) I expected many more students to use Web 2.0 tools or CALL strategies. Yet, the half of the respondents surveyed do not say they have received any strategy-based instruction. Thinking of the results about learning strategies suggested by teachers, a question naturally arises: how is it that students attending the same class give different answers? Some of them affirm they have received advice on the learning strategies to use to learn more efficiently, others overtly answer "no". If students do not fully perceive the teacher's advice on learning strategies, maybe the strategy-based instruction has not been sufficiently explicit, so far. For this reason, a more transparent strategies-based instruction is needed. It could be integrated into traditional teaching methods and provided for those students who express particular difficulties. After all (re-proposing a definition already quoted in Chapter 2), this is what a learning strategy is: "some form of activity that is used in response to problems when and where they arise" (Grenfell & Macaro, 2007: 10). In this way, students could be made more aware of Language Learning Strategies and then freely choose those strategies which would give them the chance to become better language learners. As stressed in Chapter 2, quoting Hamilton (2013: 27): "the premise of learner training is to furnish learners with strategies and the confidence to embrace increased responsibility, preparing them for independence, focusing their attention on the process of learning, with an emphasis on *how* rather than *what* to learn". So, many scholars (see Chapter 2) agree that students should be given not only tasks to accomplish, but also tools to do so; in other words, strategies should be overtly taught in modern classes.

Learners need to learn how to learn, and teachers need to learn how to facilitate the process. Although learning is certainly part is certainly part of the human condition, conscious skill in self-directed learning and in strategy use must be sharpened through training. Strategy training is especially necessary in the area of second and foreign languages (Oxford, 1990: 201).

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to stress the potential utility of language learning strategies to learn English better and the need for a strategy-based instruction, which is able to provide students with the tools necessary to do so, to learn how to learn and become more autonomous learners. The literature reviewed and presented in the first two chapters of the thesis shows the potential effectiveness of language learning strategies in the enhancement of learners' autonomy and motivation for learning. For when students learn "how to use effective strategies for language learning tasks, they begin to be self-regulated learners [...] and seek opportunities for indipendent learning" (Chamot, 1999: 53). Yet why should autonomous learning be enhanced? The answer is simple: because autonomous learners are better language learners (Benson, 2013; Hamilton, 2013). After all, "we learn better when we are in charge of our own learning because of cognitive, social and affective aspects involved in the learning process" (Ciekanski, 2007: 112). For this reason, autonomy should be a learning goal (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Benson, 2013; Hamilton, 2013). How can autonomy be enhanced? One way is through the use of learning strategies and the exploitation of the Web 2.0 and CALL tools.

As stressed in Chapter 2, among the advantages of e-learning, indeed, there are: the individualization of the teaching process, self-pacing, interactivity, evaluation, engagement, availability (Pichiassi, 1999).

♦ Individualization of the teaching process: the learner can explore individual paths that are personalized according to the learner's linguistic level. Online platforms allow the learner to choose the quantity and the difficulty of linguistic tasks.

♦ Self-pacing: the learner can manage his/her own learning path in autonomy.

♦ Interactivity and evaluation: the learner receives immediate feedbacks on the correctness of his/her answers and exercises, so that s/he can check immediately what was correct and what was wrong.

♦ Engagement: e-learning is particularly involving because it provides images, sounds and tasks can be carried out playfully.

♦ Availability: the learner can exploit the electronic device whenever he/she has time without any kind of limits.

In addition, e-learning:

♦ enhances communication and collaboration (Shahrokni et al., 2020);

♦ stimulates creativity (Levy & Stockwell, 2006);

♦ lessens stress and anxiety (Lam, 2004).

A number of the students surveyed (although not many), say that they follow English speaking youtubers/influencers/make-up artists who post videos in English; this is a sign that Web 2.0 tools have a potential usefulness as a language learning support. In order to have some ideas about the current learning methods of English as foreign language in Reggio Calabria and on the use of language learning strategies by students, I decided to carry out a survey on a representative group of 141 high school students and 9 learners attending an Afterschool Centre. Among the aims of the study there were:

♦ investigating the most widely used strategies by students;

♦ identifying students' strengths and/or weaknesses;

♦ understanding the emotional state linked to English language learning;

♦ having an idea of the degree of their learning autonomy;

♦ trying to have an idea of their degree of motivation.

To answer one of my research questions (RQ1): "Do students have any experience of Language Learning Strategies?", in the light of the results of the case study I would affirm that the high school students surveyed do have experience of learning strategies. In particular, the highest number of respondents indicate that they adopt the following practices while learning new words: repeating/writing the word several times (41.1%); writing words in a glossary (35.5%); thinking of relationships between new word and background knowledge (34.7%). Only 4 of them (2.8%) use true applications to extend vocabulary, such as Duolingo (indicated by 3 respondents) and Elevate (indicated by 1 respondent). As concerns reading comprehension, I would say that the students surveyed are good language readers, or at least they are good guessers: indeed, the overall average frequency of use of reading strategies is quite high: this means that students are aware of reading strategies and exploit them when possible. A high percentage of them, indeed, declare they try to use a side-glossary, to infer meaning from title, from pictures, from

the context, from what is at their disposal. As concerns listening exercises, the vast majority say they to listen to English music at home (79.4%) and 73 out 141 watch television series (40 students watch television series with English subtitles, while the other 33 prefer subtitles in Italian). Similar to the overall average linked to the television series is that concerning another Web 2.0 tool: youtube. A number of respondents, 27.6% claim to follow youtubers/influencers/make-up artists who post English videos online, such as: Vsauce, PewDiePie, Davie 504, Lele Pons. 46 out of 141, text friends in English, which is surely a good way of skill training. In addition, some respondents who play videogames answer that they speak English with other players.

While overall, many high-school students have some experience of using Language Learning Strategies, the Afterschool Centre learners did not appear to know how to learn. As concerns vocabulary learning, the main action adopted was simply repeating words several times in order to remember them. As regards reading comprehension, the most widely used action with a high average frequency of use was reading the title first (average frequency of use 3.8, on a Likert scale from 1 to 5). Nobody claimed to speak English at home. Nobody did extra-exercises; two out of nine said they had received advice from teachers about learning strategies, but were not able to give examples. In addition, many claimed that they had serious difficulties in English; when answering the questin about their main difficulties, two of them chose all the language options provided: vocabulary learning; grammar learning; listening comprehension; reading; writing; speaking.

In conclusion, although many high school students appear to use Language Learning Strategies, many others do not exploit all the strategies and tools at their disposal; students at the Afterschool Centre, again, did not appear to know how to learn. In addition, from the surveys administered to both groups of participants (high school students and Afterschool Centre learners) it emerged that strategy-based instruction (SBI) is not so clear and transparent as scholars argue it should be (Chamot, 1999; Cohen, 2007; Takeuchi, Griffiths, & Coyle, 2007: 92). This leads to the answer to my second research question (RQ2): "How could they be made more aware of Language Learning Strategies?" Since "the potential for autonomy increases as an individual's awareness grows" (Cotterall, 2000: 112), it seems reasonable to try to raise in learners such awareness, to make them aware of learning strategies. According to some scholars indeed,

students "learn best in an environment where students are supported, where goals are shared, and where strategic activity is transparent" (Takeuchi, Griffiths, & Coyle, 2007: 92). This aim could be achieved by means of a higher degree of strategy-based instruction: students could be made more aware of Language Learning Strategies and then freely choose those strategies which would give them the chance to become better language learners. As stressed several times in this dissertation, "the premise of learner training is to furnish learners with strategies and the confidence to embrace increased responsibility, preparing them for independence, focusing their attention on the process of learning, with an emphasis on *how* rather than *what* to learn" (Hamilton, 2013: 27). Therefore, "learners need to learn how to learn, and teachers need to learn how to facilitate the process" (Oxford, 1990: 201).

Since I wanted to put my studies in practice, I decided to conduct a workshop on strategy-base instruction involving the students of the Afterschool Center, in order to provide such students with hints and advice to cope with their learning difficulties and their apparent lack of motivation. This time, the RQs were:

RQ1: "What is the reason for the learners' apparent lack of motivation?"
RQ2: "Could language strategies actually help to make them more motivated?

Answer 1 was soon clear: 6 learners out of 9 (66.7%) declared that they did not like studying English, either because they do not like the language itself, finding it too difficult, or because they did not have a good relationship with their English teacher. It is true that the relationship with the teacher can either positively or, on the contrary, negatively affect learning. It is a truth that involves not only foreign language learning but learning in general. As highlighted in Chapter 2, in section 2.3, negative past experiences may negatively affect learners' motivation, especially if learners are young (as in this case) and having their first experience with the subject: among such negative past experiences there are conflicts with teachers as well. Teachers' behaviour may, in other words, affect learners' attitude towards the subject they teach. For this reason, in Chapter 1 I stressed necessity of a positive classroom atmosphere, relaxing and pleasant but at the same time stimulating. In addition, students declared finding the traditional grammar-based method too boring. I did what was in my power to make learning more engaging. Although the

time spent together was too short to see their skills dramatically, at least I noticed a change of approach and attitude towards English learning. This confirms that, in language learning, the affective dimension should not be undervalued.

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CALL-EJ

http://callej.org/index.html

CARLA (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition)

https://carla.umn.edu

Collins Dictionary

https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/language

Commonsense.org

https://www.commonsense.org/education/website/kahoot

Dictionary.com

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Digital Commons at University of Nebraska - Lincoln

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Research gate

https://www.researchgate.net

Appendix

Questionario sulle strategie di apprendimento linguistico

Carissimi studenti,

mi chiamo Laura Nucera e sono una studentessa iscritta al corso di laurea magistrale in Lingue Moderne per la Comunicazione e la Cooperazione Internazionale presso l'Università degli Studi di Padova. Sto lavorando ad un progetto di tesi incentrato sull'utilizzo delle strategie di apprendimento linguistico – nel caso, di apprendimento dell'inglese come lingua straniera. A tal fine ho redatto il seguente questionario, che mi servirà per condurre un'indagine su quelle che sono le strategie di apprendimento maggiormente impiegate dagli studenti degli istituti superiori che studiano la lingua inglese. Tra gli altri obiettivi dell'indagine vi sono: individuare i punti di forza e/o difficoltà degli studenti nelle varie abilità linguistiche; conoscere lo stato emotivo legato all'apprendimento della lingua inglese; avere un riscontro sul grado di studio autonomo condotto dal singolo studente al di fuori del contesto scolastico.

Il presente questionario è suddiviso in 8 piccole sezioni per un totale di 15 domande e richiede all'incirca 10 minuti della vostra attenzione per essere compilato. Troverete: domande a risposta multipla (a molte delle quali potrete rispondere barrando più caselle); domande a risposta aperta; domande in cui vi chiedo di indicare, su una scala da 1 a 5, con che frequenza svolgete abitualmente l'azione indicata. In caso di dubbi, non esitate a chiedermi ulteriori delucidazioni.

Vi ringrazio per il vostro tempo e per soprattutto per l'essenziale contributo.

Laura Nucera

Indirizzo (classico, linguistico, etc.): _____ Livello (A2, B1,etc.): _____

Età_____ Classe_____ Da quanti anni studi inglese._____

1. Apprendere un nuovo vocabolo
♦ Cosa fai quando devi imparare un nuovo vocabolo? (Puoi dare <u>più</u> risposte)
□ Ripeto o scrivo la stessa parola più volte.
□ Trascrivo la parola in un glossario.
□ Rifletto sulle relazioni tra ciò che già so e la nuova parola da imparare, per ricordarla meglio.
□ Inserisco la parola in una frase, in modo da ricordarla.
□ Collego il suono della nuova parola ad una immagine.
□ Uso le rime per ricordare le nuove parole.
□ Uso applicazioni sul cellulare (se sì, fai un esempio)_____

□ Altro*:_____

_____
*Se fai qualcosa che non è stato elencato, scrivilo nello spazio qui sopra.

2. Imparare la grammatica
♦ In che modo preferisci imparare le regole di grammatica? (Puoi dare <u>più</u> risposte)
□ Imparo la regola a memoria ripetendola più volte ad alta voce.
□Prima imparo la regola e poi svolgo gli esercizi.
□ Svolgo direttamente gli esercizi e, se ho dubbi, leggo la regola che non conosco o non ricordo.
□ Dopo che ho imparato una nuova regola, cerco di individuarla in un nuovo testo.
□ Scrivo le regole più importanti su un quaderno/agenda.
□ Se non ho capito una regola, chiedo aiuto all'insegnante.
□ Non importa se non capisco tutte le regole di grammatica.

□ Altro:_____

_____

3. Ascoltare
♦ Durante un esercizio di ascolto…
□ Cerco di cogliere l'argomento generale. □ Mi focalizzo su un dettaglio in particolare.

♦ Quando ascolti un dialogo in lingua inglese, ti capita di essere agitato? Cerchia <u>un</u> numero da 1 a 5.

1) Mai;   2) Raramente;   3) Qualche volta;   4) Spesso;   5) Sempre.

♦ Che tipo di esercizi di ascolto fai a casa? (Puoi dare <u>più</u> risposte)

□ Ascolto musica in inglese.

□ Guardo serie tv in inglese con i sottotitoli in: □ italiano / □ inglese.

□ Seguo youtubers che pubblicano video in inglese. Esempio:_____

□ A casa non faccio nessun esercizio di ascolto in inglese.

□ Altro: _____

4. Leggere

♦ Per ogni affermazione presente in tabella, cerchia un numero da 1 a 5 sulla base della <u>frequenza</u> con cui svolgi l'azione.

Leggenda: 1 = Mai   2 = Raramente   3 = Qualche volta   4 = Spesso   5 = Sempre

La prima cosa che faccio è leggere il titolo del testo.	1	2	3	4	5
Dal titolo cerco di prevedere di cosa potrebbe trattare il testo.	1	2	3	4	5
Guardo attentamente le illustrazioni (se presenti) per capire di cosa potrebbe trattare il testo.	1	2	3	4	5
Prima di leggere il testo, leggo le domande.	1	2	3	4	5
Cerco di cogliere l'argomento di cui tratta il testo in maniera generale.	1	2	3	4	5
Mi fermo ogni volta che incontro un termine sconosciuto.	1	2	3	4	5
Tralascio le parole che non conosco	1	2	3	4	5
Leggo il glossario (se presente).	1	2	3	4	5
Rileggo più volte le stesse porzioni di testo o le stesse parole.	1	2	3	4	5
Sottolineo le informazioni principali.	1	2	3	4	5
Traduco parola per parola.	1	2	3	4	5
Mi servo del contesto per capire il significato di una parola che non conosco invece di ricercarne immediatamente il significato sul dizionario.	1	2	3	4	5

5. Parlare

♦ Quando devi conversare in inglese ti senti agitato… (Scegli <u>una</u> delle seguenti risposte)

1) Mai;   2) Raramente;   3) Qualche volta;   4) Spesso;   5) Sempre.

♦ Ti imbarazza essere corretto dall'insegnante di fronte ai tuoi compagni di classe quando commetti un errore parlando in inglese?

□ No, perché_____

□ Sì, perché_____

♦ Parli in inglese fuori dall'ambiente scolastico? Se sì, come e con chi?_____

6. Scrivere

♦ Ti eserciti a scrivere in inglese anche quando non hai compiti oppure svolgi solamente i compiti assegnati?

_____

♦ Hai un amico cui scrivi in inglese? Se sì, come lo hai conosciuto? Come e con che frequenza vi scrivete?

_____

_____

_____

♦ Annoti le correzioni che l'insegnante fa ai tuoi compiti scritti?   □Sì   □No

7. In classe con l'insegnante

♦ L'insegnante ti ha mai suggerito qualche trucchetto per imparare meglio l'inglese? □Sì   □No

Se sì, quale?_____

_____

_____

8. Altro

♦ In quali aspetti hai più difficoltà ? (Puoi dare più risposte).
□Apprendere nuovi vocaboli □Imparare la grammatica □Ascoltare □Leggere □Parlare □Scrivere

♦ Studi con piacere l'inglese? Pensi ti possa essere utile in futuro? Motiva le risposte.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Grazie per aver partecipato.

Riassunto

Prima di intraprendere il mio percorso accademico e specializzarmi nelle lingue straniere, mi è sempre stato detto cosa fosse importante studiare e apprendere, ma raramente mi è stato spiegato il modo in cui farlo. Eppure, non è importante semplicemente sapere cosa imparare, ma anche avere gli strumenti adeguati per farlo. Avere un buon metodo di studio, dunque, è fondamentale, a prescindere dalla materia in questione. Le lingue straniere non solo non fanno eccezione ma, forse, in questo campo è persino più importante possedere degli strumenti utili per facilitare l'apprendimento. Per i ragazzi che si cimentano nello studio di una lingua straniera, infatti, è importante non solo essere istruiti su quelli che sono gli aspetti formali della lingua, sul suo funzionamento e le sue strutture, ma anche ricevere dei consigli pratici, strategici per imparare al meglio e per superare le eventuali difficoltà.

Ma cos'è una strategia? Etimologicamente il termine deriva dal greco στρατηγία, termine appartenente al gergo militare e indicante le azioni messe in atto per una migliore ed efficiente gestione e organizzazione delle truppe durante una spedizione militare. Inutile dire che le strategie di apprendimento linguistico descritte in questo elaborato nulla hanno a che vedere con guerra e violenza, ma l'originario concetto del programmare un'azione con un dato fine, questo rimane. Una strategia linguistica è un'azione programmata al fine di acquisire, nella maniera più efficace possibile, le competenze linguistiche necessarie e di affrontare le eventuali difficoltà incontrate durante il percorso di formazione. Secondo Rubin (1975), che con il suo articolo *What the "Good Language Learner" Can Teach Us* ha, seppur inconsapevolmente, dato inizio ad un dibattito epocale su quelli che sarebbero i tratti distintivi del "buon discente", tra questi vi sarebbe l'uso delle strategie di apprendimento linguistico. In altre parole, oltre alle caratteristiche proprie del singolo (tra cui le doti innate dell'individuo, la sua personale predisposizione nei confronti dell'apprendimento delle lingue), ci sarebbe altro: ovvero l'uso di determinate strategie che permetterebbero agli uni di apprendere meglio (o almeno con minori difficoltà) degli altri. La categorizzazione forse più esaustiva fornita fino ad ora è da attribuire a Rebecca L. Oxford (1990), la quale fornisce una lista di ben sessantadue

strategie. Oxford (1990) le classifica in due classi, sei gruppi e diciannove sottogruppi[22]. Innanzitutto, la prima distinzione che Oxford (1990) fa è tra strategie dirette (così chiamate perché prevedono un uso diretto della lingua) e strategie indirette (che, al contrario, non riguardano l'uso della lingua in sé, ma si concentrano su altri aspetti, come quelli emotivo e sociale).

Tra le strategie dirette vi sono:

♦ strategie mnemoniche;
♦ strategie cognitive;
♦ strategie di compensazione.

Per quanto riguarda le strategie mnemoniche, queste sono appunto volte a stimolare e favorire l'acquisizione e a reperire le informazioni già presenti nella memoria a lungo termine, ad esempio: a) creare collegamenti tra la nuova parola da imparare e le conoscenze pregresse; b) sfruttare suoni e immagini; c) ripetere per rinforzare la memoria; d) coinvolgere i movimenti del corpo. In particolare, in riferimento a quest'ultima azione, nel 1979 è stato elaborato dallo studioso Asher una metodologia che prevede la sinergia di parola e movimento corporeo, la *Total Physical Response*.

Le strategie cognitive riguardano la manipolazione della lingua di arrivo, sempre con lo scopo di favorire l'apprendimento; Oxford (1990) riporta tra di esse: a) andare alla ricerca di possibilità di uso pratico della lingua; b) ricevere e mandare messaggi, quindi lavorare sull'informazione in entrata (input) attraverso tecniche di skimming o scanning e produrre messaggi in uscita (output); c) analizzare e razionalizzare l'input, cercando di (a seconda delle esigenze) cogliere il senso generale o di soffermarsi su dettagli; d) creare una struttura, ad esempio sottolineando le informazioni più importanti, prendendo appunti (in lingua) e sintetizzando.

Le strategie di compensazione sono invece degli escamotage per sopperire a lacune linguistiche, ad esempio: a) intuire in maniera intelligente b) superare i limiti nel parlato e nello scritto. Quello che si può fare quando le conoscenze linguistiche non sono sufficienti per comprendere è ad esempio analizzare in maniera ragionata l'input, per

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[22] jjjj Per ragioni di tempo, nel presente studio non sono state riportate tutte e sessantadue le strategie, ma solo parte di esse. Per un ulteriore e più dettagliato approfondimento si rimanda ad Oxford (1990).

esempio cercando di dedurre il significato di una parola scritta considerando attentamente il contesto (quindi il contesto situazionale, ma anche gli eventuali elementi grafici quali titolo del testo, immagini, domande legate al testo); nel caso di limitazioni nella produzione orale, è possibile utilizzare circumlocuzioni al posto della parola che non si ricorda, usare sinonimi oppure ancora esprimere un messaggio in maniera più generica e meno dettagliata, in modo tale di evitare di dover ricorrere a termini specifici che non si conoscono.

Tra le strategie indirette vi sono invece:

♦ strategie metacognitive;
♦ strategie affettive;
♦ strategie sociali.

Vengono indicate come strategie metacognitive, volte a regolare e coordinare il processo cognitivo: a) definire il percorso di apprendimento, nel senso di stabilire obiettivi realistici e oggettivamente realizzabili; b) organizzare e programmare il percorso di apprendimento, ponendo delle scadenze a breve termine e infine c) valutare il percorso svolto, gli obiettivi raggiunti e gli eventuali aspetti da migliorare. A tal fine il Consiglio d'Europa ha elaborato un utilissimo quadro di riferimento, che consente non sono agli insegnanti di valutare i propri studenti, ma agli studenti stessi di valutare le proprie capacità e definire e delineare con più chiarezza gli obiettivi futuri: è il CEFR, o quadro di riferimento europeo, valido non solo per la lingua inglese, ma che può essere utilizzato come metro di giudizio per valutare la competenza in qualsiasi lingua. Nonostante la notorietà del quadro di riferimento europeo e la sua utilità nella valutazione delle competenze linguistiche, ci sono studenti che purtroppo ne ignorano l'esistenza, o non sono in grado di utilizzarlo.

Tornando alle strategie, tra quelle sociali, volte a sviluppare competenze comunicative, invece, vi sono: fare domande, chiedendo spiegazioni e chiarimenti; collaborare con i compagni per sviluppare una positiva interdipendenza e supportarsi vicendevolmente. Del resto, la lingua è un fenomeno sociale e il motivo della sua invenzione è proprio quello di comunicare con gli altri: esprimere i propri pensieri, le proprie opinioni, esternare i propri sentimenti. La natura sociale della lingua è dimostrata

dal fatto che, se isolato dalla propria comunità linguistica, un bambino non sarebbe in grado di parlare, né di sviluppare alcuna capacità di espressione verbale. Analogamente, per imparare una lingua straniera è necessario interagire: una lingua straniera non può essere imparata in isolamento. Di qui la necessità di interagire con altri interlocutori. In particolare, evidenti progressi si possono avere nel momento in cui si interagisce con interlocutori più esperti, con nativi della lingua o comunque con chi ha un livello linguistico superiore a quello del discente (Oxford & Schramm, 2007). Similmente, interagire con un parlante di livello linguistico notevolmente inferiore può portare a regredire linguisticamente. Le competenze linguistiche, infatti, non sono immutabili: inutile dire che, se non costantemente stimolate e messe alla prova, le competenze linguistiche possono anche regredire.

Tornando alla classificazione delle strategie indirette, esempi di quelle affettive sono: a) abbassare i livelli di ansia; b) auto-motivarsi; c) controllare le proprie emozioni. L'aspetto emotivo, infatti, non è assolutamente da sottovalutare. Sensazioni negative quali ansia, nervosismo, stress, influenzano negativamente l'apprendimento. Già Krashen nel 1985 aveva elaborato l'ipotesi del filtro affettivo, ovvero una barriera emotiva capace di ostacolare l'apprendimento, barriera innalzata appunto dalle emozioni negative. Questa teoria è stata poi confermata scientificamente da studi che dimostrano come tali emozioni scatenino la produzione di un ormone (il cortisolo) che inibisce le funzioni cognitive (cfr Ferro, 1993). Situazione che si verifica con maggiore intensità quando ci si accosta allo studio delle lingue, per molti è particolare fonte di ansia e preoccupazione (cfr Horwitz & Young, 1986).

Rapportarsi, invece, con un computer, il quale non ha né idee proprie, né prova emozioni, riduce i livelli di ansia e stress. Il discente, quindi, non ha paura di essere giudicato, in quanto non vi è rischio di commettere errori di fronte ad altre persone. Per questo motivo, molti discenti, tra cui quelli timidi e introversi, potrebbero trovare l' e-learning particolarmente confortevole e rilassante. Inoltre, altro vantaggio del Web 2.0 è quello di stimolare la curiosità e di essere particolarmente coinvolgente e motivante.

La motivazione è forse uno dei fattori che più influenza l'apprendimento di una lingua straniera. Il termine deriva dal latino *movere,* che vuol dire letteralmente "muovere". La motivazione, infatti, è ciò che "muove" una persona a fare certe scelte e compiere determinate azioni. Senza motivazione, nulla si ottiene e, in particolare, nessuna

lingua si apprende. Tante sono le classificazioni che, nel corso del tempo, gli studiosi hanno fornito, ad esempio:

- Gardner and Lambert (1972) distinguono tra motivazione strumentale (derivante dal desiderio di imparare una lingua per via della sua utilità pratica) e motivazione integrazionale (derivante dal desiderio di diventare parte integrante della comunità della lingua di arrivo);

- Ryan & Deci (2000) distinguono tra motivazione intrinseca (derivante da ragioni personali) ed estrinseca (ovvero esternamente imposta);

- Ellis (1997) distingue quattro tipi motivazionali: motivazione strumentale, integrazionale (simili alle tipologie individuate da Gardner e Lambert), motivazione intrinseca (derivante dal piacere di apprendere una lingua straniera) e risultativa, (così chiamata perché è il risultato, la conseguenza, di un'azione gratificante e soddisfacente).

In altre parole, secondo quest'ultima categorizzazione, i risultati soddisfacenti sarebbero essi stessi uno stimolo a continuare nell'azione che ha portato al successo (nel caso dell'apprendimento delle lingue straniere, che ha portato al soddisfacimento degli obiettivi linguistici prefissati). Anche Lightbown & Spada (1993) condividono questo pensiero, giungendo alla conclusione che il rapporto tra motivazione e successo non sia di tipo causa-effetto, ma di tipo circolare: maggiore è la motivazione, più grande sarà il successo ottenuto; più grande è il successo ottenuto, maggiore sarà la motivazione.

Come se non bastasse, la motivazione è difficile da trovare, ma facile da perdere. Per questo è necessario che venga costantemente stimolata. Il "buon" discente, infatti, non è solo quello cui risulta facile apprendere una lingua, ma colui che ha perseverato, che ha vinto la frustrazione e visto i suoi sforzi ricompensati (Stern, 1983). Ma a chi spetta il compito di stimolare la motivazione? Agli insegnanti? Sicuramente la motivazione non può essere imposta e gli insegnanti non possono costringere gli studenti a mostrare interesse nei confronti della materia che insegnano. Ciononostante, qualcosa che essi possono fare c'è: potrebbero lavorare sull'aspetto emotivo, che, come detto in precedenza, ha una decisiva influenza sull'apprendimento linguisitico. In particolare, possono cercare di rendere l'atmosfera piacevole e rilassante, mostrandosi disponibili a rispondere alle domande; fornendo l'aiuto e le delucidazioni richieste; tollerando gli errori; incoraggiando gli studenti (Dörnyei, 2001). L'essere umano, per natura, tende a

tutelare la propria immagine e non ingaggerebbe mai azioni che potrebbero minare alla proprio autostima (Covington, 1992). Analogamente, quando lo studente riconosce la classe come un "posto sicuro", dove la propria autostima è salva, di conseguenza acquisisce confidenza e si sente più incoraggiato (Dörnyei, 2001).

Inoltre, considerata l'efficacia del Web 2.0 e degli strumenti CALL (tecnologie per l'apprendimento linguistico), gli insegnanti potrebbero pensare di integrare questi strumenti alla didattica tradizionale. Lo studente, dal canto suo, per alimentare la propria motivazione, potrebbe sia utilizzate le strategie indicate da Oxford (1990), che sfruttare egli stesso, in autonomia, gli strumenti forniti dall'e-learning. Persino gli strumenti più ludici, infatti, hanno dimostrato di avere una profonda utilità: si pensi ad esempio ai MMOGs[23] (giochi online di massa che supportano centinaia o migliaia di giocatori), che non solo stimolano le dinamiche sociali e la collaborazione tra più giocatori, ma allo stesso tempo creano un ambiente educativo davvero ricco, considerando il fatto che, per comunicare tra loro e organizzare le missioni, i giocatori di nazionalità diverse utilizzano l'inglese come lingua franca. Ecco il motivo per cui persino un gioco può diventare strumento educativo (Kioumarsi, 2018; Alizadeh, 2019). Anche social networks come Facebook, Youtube e Instagram hanno un certo potenziale, considerata sia la facilità con cui si possono reperire contenuti in lingua inglese (e con sottotitoli in lingua), ma anche la possibilità che queste piattaforme danno di creare communities a livello internazionale dove, anche in questo caso, la lingua franca è l'inglese. Alla luce delle considerazioni fatte, risultano chiari i benefici derivanti dall'integrazione delle strategie di apprendimento e dell'e-learning con la didattica tradizionale.

Per avere un prospetto della situazione corrente a Reggio Calabria, ho svolto un'indagine diretta, con gli obiettivi di: investigare le strategie linguistiche più usate dagli studenti; cercare di ottenere indizi sul loro livello di autonomia e di motivazione; comprendere il loro livello di istruzione sui metodi di apprendimento. A tal fine, ho intervistato un gruppo rappresentativo di 141 studenti delle scuole superiori e 9 ragazzi frequentanti un doposcuola. Gli istituti superiori presso cui ho condotto l'indagine sono stati il Liceo "Luigi Nostro" e l'Istituto "Leonida Repaci" di Villa San Giovanni, che dal 2013 sono stati inglobati in un unico istituto comprensivo, che oggi porta il nome di

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[23] acronimo per Massive Multiplayer Online Games

"Nostro-Repaci". I dati sono stati raccolti in forma anonima, in rispetto della normativa vigente sulla privacy e previa autorizzazione della direttrice. La scuola è stata scelta per la pluralità degli indirizzi compresi: liceo classico; liceo scienze umane; liceo scienze umane ed economiche; liceo scientifico; liceo linguistico; liceo sportivo; liceo di scienze applicate; istituto tecnico. Per ragioni di facilità di indagine e per rendere il campione omogeneo, ho riunito gli indirizzi in quattro macro-gruppi: gruppo umanistico, gruppo scientifico, gruppo linguistico e gruppo tecnico. Il primo gruppo, quello umanistico conta circa il 21% degli intervistati, pari al gruppo tecnico; il gruppo scientifico comprende il 33% del totale degli studenti, mentre quello linguistico il 25%. Per quanto riguarda il livello linguistico degli intervistati, il 29,8% dichiara un livello B1; il 7,1% dichiara un livello A2; il 6,4% dichiara un B2; 1 studente (su 141) dichiara un livello A1; 1 studente dichiara un livello C1; la restante parte di intervistati, equivalente al 55,3%, non è in grado di definire il proprio livello linguistico. Analizzando la situazione per indirizzo, emerge che gli studenti che hanno più consapevolezza del loro livello (o comunque capaci di indicarlo) sono quelli del liceo linguistico, sebbene anche il 25,7% di questo gruppo non sia in grado di autovalutarsi. Eppure, questa percentuale, risulta essere la più bassa, a fronte del 70% di non dichiaranti riscontrato tra gli studenti del gruppo umanistico e il 73,3% del gruppo tecnico.

I partecipanti sono stati intervistati attraverso un questionario (vedi Appendice) scritto in italiano e diviso in otto sezioni, per un totale di quindici domande. Le sezioni del questionario sono: apprendimento dei vocaboli; apprendimento della grammatica; ascolto; lettura; parlare; scrivere; in classe con l'insegnante; altri aspetti. Le domande sono di tre tipi: domande a risposta multipla, domande a risposta aperta e domande in cui viene chiesto agli studenti di indicare, su una scala Likert da 1 a 5, il grado di frequenza con cui essi svolgono le azioni indicate. Le prime domande riguardano le azioni abitualmente svolte per l'apprendimeto dei vocaboli e per l'apprendimento della grammatica. Per apprendere i vocaboli, il 41,1% dichiara di ripetere/riscrivere più volte la parola da imparare; il 35,5% scrive le parole in un glossario; il 34,7% cerca di creare legami tra le nuove parole e le conoscenze pregresse. Ho inoltre chiesto se usino applicazioni per smartphone e di fare eventualmente esempi. Non solo la percentuale di rispondenti è stata bassa, pari ovvero al 14,8%, ma di questi soltanto quattro hanno indicato una vera e propria applicazione (due rispondono Duolingo e un rispondente

indica Elevate). Per apprendere la grammatica, 32,6% dichiara di raccoglie le regole in una agenda, barrando l'opzione da me indicata. Inoltre, il 28,3%, dopo avere imparato la regola, cerca di individuarla in un nuovo testo. Gli studenti che in particolare hanno questa propensione sono gli studenti del gruppo scientifico, che indicano questa azione al 67,4%, mentre solo il 6,7% degli studenti del gruppo tecnico sceglie tale opzione. Solo il 3,5% risponde che non gli importa di non essere in grado di apprendere ogni regola, segno che la grammatica è ritenuta importante dalla stragrande maggioranza degli studenti. Tuttavia, nel questionario ho chiesto loro di fornire un esempio di ulteriori strategie impiegate per l'apprendimento delle regole di grammatica, ma la voce "altro" non viene compilata da nessuno degli studenti.

Per quanto riguarda l'ascolto, ho formulato una domanda per capire la loro attitudine durante gli esercizi: se sono propensi a cogliere il significato generale, o se invece si soffermano su quello particolare. Inoltre, ho chiesto agli studenti di indicare gli esercizi di ascolto che fanno a casa. In tantissimi hanno risposto di ascoltare musica, ovvero il 79,4%. Metà degli intervistati guarda serie tv in inglese; tuttavia solo il 28,3% sceglie sottotitoli in lingua, mentre gli altri preferiscono sottotitoli in italiano. Il 27,6% dichiara di seguire youtubers che pubblicano video in inglese, come (riporto i loro esempi) Vsauce, PewDiePie, Davie 504, Lele Pons. Il motivo per cui ho fatto loro questa domanda relativa alle serie tv in lingua inglese e ai canali web è che il Web 2.0, come già precedentemente sottolineato, ha dimostrato di essere un ottimo strumento per l'apprendimento linguistico. Tuttavia, personalmente mi aspettavo di riscontrare una percentuale ancora più alta di risposte relative alla sezione Youtube, considerando il successo che il canale sta riscuotendo e vista l'età dei partecipanti, che non supera i 18 anni. Per quando riguarda la produzione orale, poco più della matà dichiara di parlare l'inglese fuori da scuola; in particolare dichiarano di frequentare delle scuole di inglese private. Dal punto di vista della lettura, sulla base delle loro risposte, si potrebbe dire che sono dei buoni lettori: essi, infatti, dichiarano di servirsi di tutti gli elementi a disposizione per avere ulteriori dettagli e anticipazioni sul testo: il titolo, le illustrazioni, le domande. La produzione scritta non è esercitata dal 65,2%, mentre il 34,8% scrive ad amici (nella maggior parte conosciuti online).

Per avere informazioni sul loro stato emotivo, ho chiesto loro di indicare con che frequenza capita loro di essere agitati durante gli esercizi di ascolto e durante le

conversazioni in lingua inglese; inoltre, ho anche chiesto loro se vedono di buon grado le correzioni dell'insegnante o se, invece, si sentono imbarazzati ad essere corretti di fronte ai loro compagni di classe. Dai risultati emerge che gli studenti riescono mediamente a gestire l'ansia, sia quando fanno esercizi di ascolto che quando parlano; in paricolare, i livelli di ansia legati al parlato sono leggermente superiori a quelli legati all'ascolto. Per quanto riguarda le correzioni, essere corretti di fronte ai proprio compagni non pare infastidirli: essi, al contrario, ritengono le correzioni da parte dell'insegnante non solo utili ma anche necessarie per imparare.

Per avere invece informazioni sul loro eventule grado di motivazione, ho chiesto loro se studiano l'inglese con piacere, se lo trovano utile e quali sono le loro maggiori difficoltà. Il 95% dichiara di trovare l'inglese utile, sia in prospettiva di un lavoro futuro, sia per via dell'utilizzo dell'inglese come lingua franca a livello globale. Ma se la percentuale di studenti che trovano l'inglese utile è così alta, come mai nessuna delle strategie investigate riporta una percentuale di risposte altrettanto alta? Evidentemente tale motivazione non è sufficiente. Inoltre, è eviente che ci siano delle persone che considerano l'inglese utile, senza però che gli piaccia veramente, in quanto solo percentuale del 71,6% (a fronte del 95% che lo trova utile) studia l'inglese con piacere.

Infine, per avere informazioni sull'insegnamento in classe delle strategie di apprendimento, ho chiesto se l'insegnante abbia mai suggerito loro dei "trucchetti" per apprendere meglio la lingua. Le risposte a questa domanda sono state contradditorie: persino studenti della stessa classe hanno in alcuni casi risposto di no, in altri risposto di sì, senza fornire alcun esempio, altri invece hanno risposto di aver ricevuto consigli dall'insegnante, specificando quali. Tuttavia come è stata possibile ciò? Come è possibile che, anche all'interno della stessa classe, ci siano risposte così discordanti? Se alcuni hanno risposto negativamente e altri, seppur rispondendo affermativamente, non sono riusciti a fornire gli esempi richiesti, allora vuol dire che forse l'istruzione sulle strategie di apprendimento linguistico dovrebbe essere più esplicita. In particolare, dovrebbero essere adottate delle strategie mirate per risolvere le difficoltà degli studenti, i quali dichiarano di trovare particolarmente difficili l'ascolto (37,6%) e la produzione orale (42,5%).

Come detto precedentemente, ho anche intervistato 9 studenti, frequentanti un doposcuola che si trova in una città limitrofa. Il doposcuola è frequentato da bambini

particolarmente demotivati e che non riescono (o non vogliono) fare i compiti da soli, ma preferiscono svolgerli sotto supervisione. I 9 bambini frequentano classi diverse di istituti diversi, hanno un'età media di 13 anni. Per quanto riguarda il loro livello linguistico, nessuno è stato in grado di dichiararlo. Per quanto riguarda le altre risposte, i bambini intervistati hanno indicato come unica azione svolta per imparare i vocaboli quella di ripetere o trascrivere la parola più volte; l'unica azione svolta con un'alta frequenza durante la comprensione del testo (3.8 su scala Likert) è leggere il titolo del testo; nessuno dichiara di fare esercizi extra per esercitarsi nella produzione scritta; 5 su 9 ascoltano musica in lingua inglese.

Alla domanda: "L'insegnante ti ha mai suggerito qualche trucchetto per imparare meglio l'inglese? Se sì, quale?" solo due rispondono affermativamente, ma non sanno fare esempi. In aggiunta, molti dichiarano di avere serie difficoltà in inglese, in particolare 2 di loro alla domanda: "In quali aspetti hai più difficoltà ?" Rispondono barrando ogni casella, quindi dichiarano di avere difficoltà in ogni area. Inoltre, i livelli di agitazione relativi alla produzione stavolta erano più alti di quelli riscontrati alle scuole superiori: frequenza di agitazione pari a 4 (su scala Likert da 1 a 5).

Per aiutarli, dunque, ho deciso di condurre un workshop basato sull'insegnamento delle strategies linguistiche, per fornire loro degli strumenti utili per affrontare le proprie difficoltà. Dopo un workshop iniziale di sei incontri, li ho autati a svolgere i compiti di inglese un paio di volte a settimana, per un mese, sempre suggerendo loro di servirsi delle strategie imparate durante il workshop. Ma le difficoltà linguistiche non erano gli unici problemi. Come affrontare l'apparente mancanza di motivazione? Ho cercato di mettere in pratica i consigli strategici di Oxford (1990), stimolando la vista e l'udito; cercando di scoprire i loro interessi; stimolando la curiosità, la collaborazione, l'interazione. In particolare, nel momento in cui la responsalbilità di spiegare determinati concetti passava a loro, allora dimostravano più impegno. Nostante il poco tempo passato insieme, ho avuto modo di constatare i primissimi visibili risultati, almeno nell'approccio e attitudine personale nei confronti della lingua straniera.

Alla luce dell'indagine svolta e del workshop condotti, dunque, risulta necessaria una svolta pedagogica, che risulti in un metodo di insegnamento più stimolante e coinvolgente e che indirizzi il discente verso azioni strategiche da poter usare in autonomia.