Lending ears to EFL learners: perceived difficulties and leading causes

Irina Stan
Università degli Studi del Piemonte Orientale
irina.stan@uniupo.it

Abstract
In Italy, English learning primarily occurs within the confines of the classroom rather than through everyday communication. Consequently, Italian learners of English often lack opportunities to utilize the language as a means of daily communication outside educational settings, thereby emphasizing the pivotal role of formal instruction in shaping their English proficiency. Given the concerning proficiency levels reported in both European and national assessments, this study aims to explore the challenges encountered by students of English as a foreign language (EFL) and their underlying causes. A total of 447 first-year undergraduates, not majoring in English, participated in the study. Data were collected via an open-ended question and a questionnaire, and subsequently analyzed using thematic coding. The findings revealed that students predominantly face barriers of linguistic, instructional, and affective nature, compounded by limited opportunities for practical application beyond the classroom. Based on these results, the study offers insights into potential factors contributing to these challenges and provides recommendations aimed at assisting educators and learners in overcoming barriers associated with EFL instruction in Italy.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language; Second Language Learning; difficulties; perception.

1. Overview

In 1997 Pulcini noted that "Italians are famous for being poor at foreign language", attributing this to the sociolinguistic and educational situation of the country (Pulcini 1997: 82). Despite nearly three decades having passed since this observation, the proficiency of Italians in foreign languages appears to have seen limited improvement, despite various regulatory efforts, particularly within the educational system[1]. Recent European statistics indicate that 62% of Italians report being unable to converse in any language other than their native one. National surveys[2] further reveal that while approximately 80% of individuals under the age of 34 claim knowledge of one or more foreign languages, the levels of proficiency remain modest, with only 7.2% describing their English proficiency as excellent, 27% as good, and a significant 28% admitting to poor proficiency.

Over the years, extensive research has explored the roles played by diverse internal and external factors in influencing outcomes in second or foreign language acquisition (e.g.,

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[1] English is the *de facto* mandatory foreign language in Italian schools: although there is technically no legal provision imposing English as a requirement, over 90% of students in Italy learn English at all school levels (European Commission et al., 2017). Moreover, Italy is one of the EU countries with the highest number of years of compulsory foreign language education (13 years) and highest number of hours devoted to foreign language study (with a peak of 194 recommended hours per year in high-schools) (*ibid.*).

[2] https://www.istat.it/it/files/2017/12/Report_Uso-italiano_dialetti_altrelingue_2015.pdf.

Brown, 1995; Ellis, 2008). This distinction is crucial between second language acquisition (SLA), occurring naturally through social communication beyond classroom settings, and second language learning (SLL), a conscious process typically occurring within structured educational environments (Krashen 1981). The latter focuses on systematic learning of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, emphasizing rule-based knowledge rather than practical usage, thereby suggesting differing influential factors.

Internal factors influencing language learning encompass physical attributes such as age, health, and disabilities, as well as psychological factors including intelligence, attitudes, motivation, learning styles, and strategies (Caon 2022). External factors, beyond the learner's control, encompass language exposure, interaction, familial influences, teaching methodologies, curriculum materials, and societal dynamics. Both internal and external factors or their interplay can pose challenges to effective English as a foreign language (EFL) acquisition.

Despite considerable research exploring difficulties in EFL proficiency across the four primary skills: listening (Chen 2005; Goh 2000; Graham 2006; Rost 2011; Vandergrift, Goh, 2012), speaking (Chou 2018, Rababah 2003; Sayuri 2016; Shen, Chiu 2019; for a recent overview on English speaking research see also Wang *et al*, 2022), reading (Al-Jarrah, Ismail 2018; Al Roomy, Alhawsawi 2019; Kasim, Raisha 2017), and writing (Alisha *et al*. 2019; Ariyanti, Fitriana 2017; Belkhir, Benyelles 2017; Mojica 2010), few studies have sought direct input from learners themselves, with much of the existing literature being experimental in nature. Notably, a study conducted over a decade ago at Ca' Foscari University in Venice (Serragiotto, 2012) stands out within the Italian context, examining recent high school graduates' perspectives on their language education experiences. This study highlighted challenges perceived in listening and speaking skills, while indicating varying perceptions of ease and difficulty in reading and writing tasks, alongside students' expressed desires to improve communicative abilities through specific activities.

This current study seeks to contribute to the field of EFL teaching and learning within the Italian context by exploring student perspectives on perceived difficulties and their underlying causes.

2. Statement of the Problem and Significance of the Study

2.1 English Proficiency in Italy

Italy is frequently characterized by its population's reputed inadequacy in foreign language skills, a perception reinforced by international reports and surveys. Consistently low rankings in European assessments of English proficiency underscore Italy's struggle, with the country placing 35th out of 113 non-native English-speaking nations in the 2023 English Proficiency Index (EPI)[3] compiled by Education First (EF), based on data from approximately two million English as a foreign language speakers worldwide. This situation is often attributed to cultural practices such as the prevalent translation and dubbing of international media, diminishing perceived necessity for foreign language proficiency (Lopriore, 2002) and limiting informal language acquisition opportunities (British Council, 2018). Historical factors including high illiteracy rates until the mid-1960s and the widespread use of regional dialects have further contributed to a national educational focus on the native language rather

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[3]   https://www.ef.com/assetscdn/WIBIwq6RdJvcD9bc8RMd/cefcom-epi-site/reports/2023/ef-epi-2023-english.pdf.

than foreign languages (Pulcini, 1997). Educational practices have also been scrutinized, with reports of fragmented language teacher training and a predominant emphasis on explicit grammar instruction, reading, and writing skills in classroom settings (Faez, 2011; Serragiotto, 2012). While empirical evidence from Italian classrooms is scarce, studies such as Faez (2011) highlight concerns among teachers regarding overemphasis on grammar and accuracy. Serragiotto's (2012) survey findings reveal that grammar and writing receive disproportionate attention in English language instruction according to student perspectives. Despite these insights, the characterization of Italians as linguistically challenged may partially stem from a dearth of research focused on younger demographics within the Italian EFL context (Bruzzano, 2021). Thus, this study aims to provide a clearer understanding of young Italian learners in the EFL setting.

2.2 Primary Difficulties in EFL Learning and Contributing Factors

Numerous studies conducted across diverse EFL contexts have documented challenges encountered by foreign language learners. Listening comprehension poses difficulties attributed to factors such as limited vocabulary, challenges in processing speaker speed, and difficulty in requesting repetition (Underwood, 1989). Similarly, issues in interpretation, concentration, and study habits have been noted (Chen, 2005). Speaking skills are often daunting for EFL learners, who struggle with inadequate vocabulary, hindering authentic communication both inside and outside the classroom (Rababah, 2003). In reading, comprehension challenges arise from difficulties in identifying main ideas, understanding contextual meanings, and linking text details to broader themes (Mourtaga, 2006). Writing proficiency, critical for academic assessment, is impeded by challenges in achieving cohesion, coherence, and logical flow in written texts, compounded by vocabulary limitations and cultural knowledge gaps (Granger & Tyson, 1996; Hinkel, 2001, 2002).

The acquisition of second languages is influenced significantly by internal and external factors. Internal factors include motivation, intelligence, age, attitude, cognitive style, and learning behaviors and strategies (Caon, 2022), with motivation recognized as particularly pivotal in driving language learning outcomes (Dörnyei & Cheng, 2007; Dörnyei & Csizer 1998). Learners' attitudes toward the target language also play a crucial role in shaping their success in second language learning (Siegel 2003). External factors encompass environmental influences such as real-life language exposure and curricular elements including text selection and teaching methodologies (Al Zaubi 2016; Win 2018). Teacher attitudes and instructional approaches further impact student engagement and language learning outcomes (Darwish 2017; Richards 2010).

While extensive research has identified various challenges faced by EFL learners worldwide, there remains a gap in understanding these issues within the specific context of Italy. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating perceived strengths and weaknesses in EFL learning among Italian learners, along with the underlying causes contributing to these challenges.

3. The Study

3.1 Participants

This quali-quantitative study involved 447 undergraduate students (63% female) commencing their studies in non-English-major programs at a large-sized university in Italy. None of the participants had achieved or demonstrated a B1 level of English proficiency, a requirement under university regulations for first-time enrollees. The participants, aged between 19 and 34 years (M=21.7; SD=2.98), were enrolled in diverse undergraduate programs such as Science and Technology, Medicine, Agricultural Science, Political Sciences, Veterinary, Physical Education, and Pharmacy. All participants were Italian natives who completed compulsory education in Italy and had been studying English for a minimum of 13 years.

3.2 The instrument and data analysis

Data were collected through a questionnaire designed to capture participants' demographic information, self-reported English proficiency (rated on a 1-7 scale aligned with CEFR *can-do* statements[4], Council of Europe 2020) and their perceived strengths and weaknesses in various language competencies (written comprehension, written production, grammar rules, vocabulary, oral expression, oral comprehension, other, or none of the above). Additionally, the questionnaire included an open-ended question prompting participants to articulate reasons behind the barriers encountered in learning and using the English language.

The questionnaire format was electronic, chosen for its accessibility and visual impact, allowing participants to provide detailed responses without space constraints and facilitating data retrieval and organization for analysis. Data analysis employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006), initially applying a grounded theory approach (Bryant & Charmaz 2007). This methodological choice enabled systematic categorization based on participants' responses, focusing on identifying conceptual themes emergent from the data rather than testing predefined hypotheses. Responses were coded to denote the presence of specific themes, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of difficulties and underlying causes in English language learning among the participants. Students' statements were coded by reporting 1 point when a specific theme was present within the answer at least once. This bottom-up approach paved the way for a more focused analysis, as the respondents' accounts about difficulties leading causes were merged to identify the general trends.

3.3 Results

Participants assessed their overall English proficiency on a scale ranging from 1 (minimum) to 7 (maximum). The distribution (Fig. 1) indicated that nearly a quarter of students perceived their proficiency as below average (2.3% selected 1, 4.5% chose 2, and 17.2% chose 3). Approximately 46% rated themselves at an intermediate level, while less than 10% rated their proficiency above the average midpoint (4.5% at levels 5 and 6, and less than 1% at level 7).
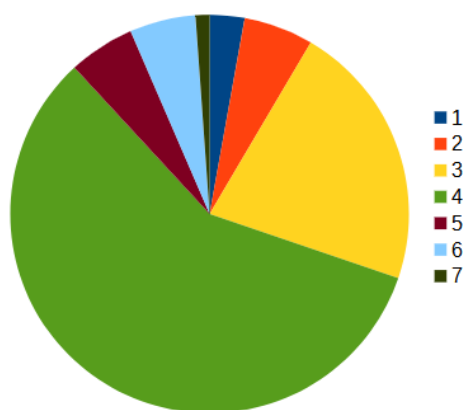
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4 www.coe.int/lang-cefr

Fig. 1. Self-assessed English proficiency

Turning to perceived strengths (Fig. 2), a significant majority of participants identified written comprehension (nearly 67%) and written production (over 54%) as their strongest skills. Approximately a third considered grammar knowledge a personal strength. Oral comprehension and oral expression were selected by about a quarter and a fifth of participants, respectively, while vocabulary received responses from approximately 16% of participants. A minority (6%) felt that none of the options represented a personal strength, with a very small percentage mentioning pronunciation.
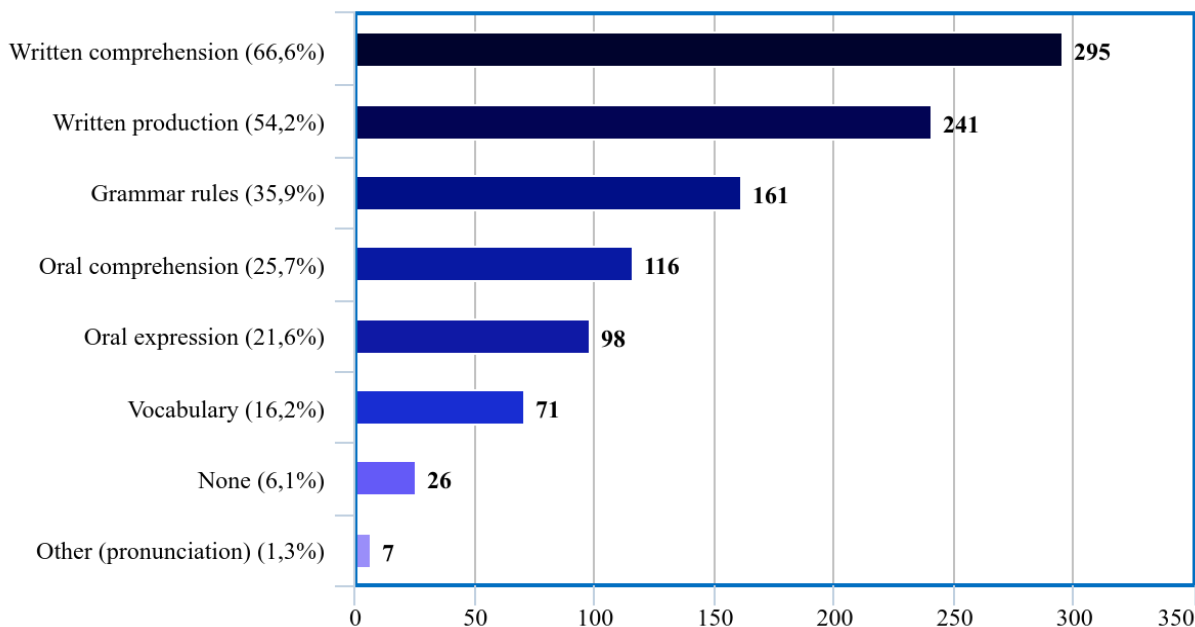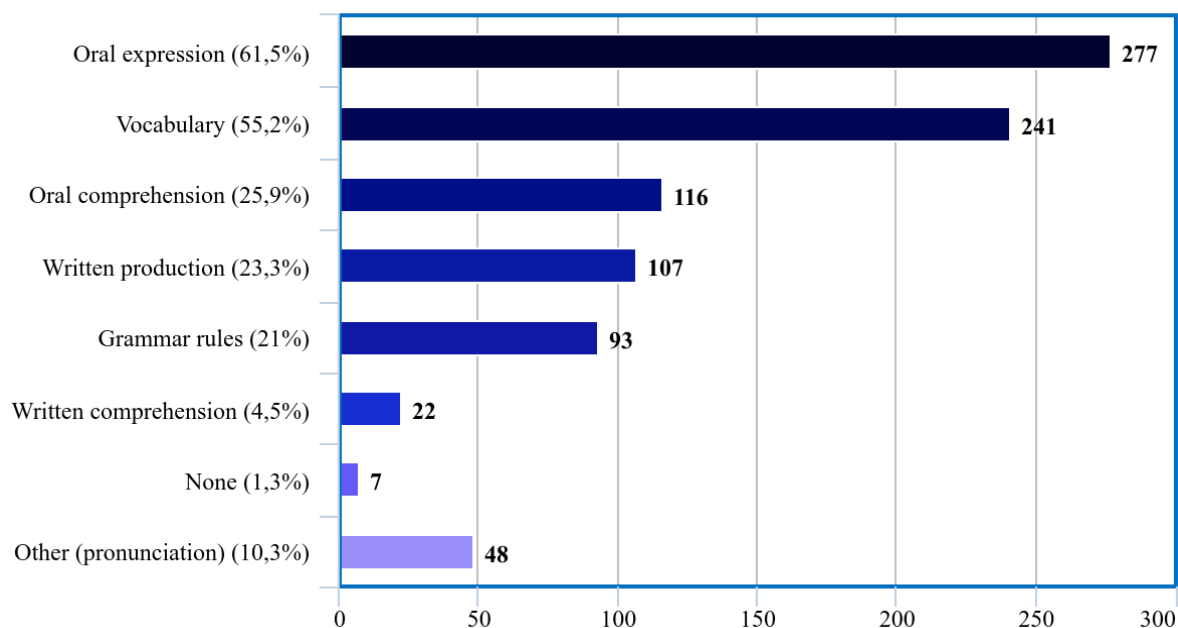

Fig. 2. Perceived strengths

Fig. 3. Perceived weaknesses

Conversely, perceived weaknesses (Fig. 3) presented a notably different and somewhat inverted distribution. More than half of the students identified oral expression (around 60%) and vocabulary (55%) as their weakest areas. In contrast, written comprehension was perceived as problematic by only 4.5% of participants. Oral comprehension, written production, and grammar rules were considered weak by between a fifth and a quarter of respondents (25%, 23%, and 21%, respectively). Pronunciation was indicated as a challenge by approximately 10% of participants, while a small minority did not select any of the provided weaknesses.

The findings from the open-ended question revealed that participants attributed their difficulties in learning and using English to several underlying causes, categorized as shown in Table 1. Three main themes emerged: deficiencies in instructional practices during compulsory education, limited exposure outside the classroom, and affective factors impacting learning experiences[5].

Theme	Category	Sub-category
	1.1 General statement (*n*=172)	- Ex. *M32: English poorly done during compulsory school*

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5 As a whole, students' written productions varied from 1 point, for example: *M26: Little learning in compulsory education*, (sub-category 1.1), to a maximum of 10, for example F27: *Little use of language in all its forms (2.1.1), particularly spoken (2.1.2). Then at school the method is deeply wrong (1.1.1), the focus is on grammar (1.1.2) and never on the practical or oral use of the language (1.2.1). I should approach the English language more (2.1.1) (watch more films in the original language (2.2.2) and read more in English (2.2.1). I would also like to go abroad more (2.3.1), because by talking more I would improve it (2.3.2), otherwise it remains confined to something I have studied but rarely use*.

1. Instructional deficiencies in compulsory education (*n*= 835)	1.1 Method *(n*=213)	1.1.1 General statement (*n*=48) Ex. *M31: In the compulsory school environment this language is not addressed with adequate methods*
		1.1.2 Focus on grammar / translation (*n*=86) Ex. *F24: A lot of hours are wasted on grammar and reading, when it would be much more useful to know how to speak it.*
		1.1.3 Testing methods (*n*=31) Ex. *M21: In 5 years of high school I have never been orally questioned by my teacher, not once, we only did multiple choice tests on grammatical constructs.*
		1.1.4 Use of Italian (*n*=48) Ex. *F19: [the teachers] always spoke in Italian*
	1.2 Lack of specific skill practice (*n*=236)	1.2.1 Speaking (*n*=167) *Ex. F26: they (the teachers) never made us discuss things in English*
		1.2.2 Listening (*n*=195) *Ex. M23: In high school and middle school the English teachers almost never gave me Listening exercises to do*
		1.2.3 Writing (*n*=41) *Ex. M19: the (teachers') belief that knowing how to write two sentences is enough to develop a text.*
	1.3 Teachers (*n*=214)	1.3.1 Teaching skills (n=109) Ex. *M22: In Italian schools, teachers are totally incompetent.*
		1.3.2 Motivation (n=82) Ex. *F20: My teachers did not know how to motivate me.*
		1.3.3 Teacher turnover (n=23) Ex. *M21: [They are due] to the continuous change of teachers in compulsory education*
	2.1 Lack of practice (*n*=206)	2.1.1 General (n=145) Ex. *F19: [They are due to] too few opportunities to use the language.*

2. Exposure outside the classroom (*n=408*)		2.1.2 Oral practice (*n=61*) Ex. F30: *[They are due to] not speaking iEnglish everyday.*
	2.2 Use of Italian (*n=108*)	2.2.1 Leisure reading (*n=35*) Ex. *F20: I have never read anything that wasn't in Italian*
		2.2.2 TV/films (*n=73*) Ex. *M23: Just as an example, I never watch films in English, only in Italian*
	2.3 Travelling (*n=58*)	2.3.1 Opportunities (n=27) Ex. *F19: I could have had better fluency if only I had been able to travel more and thus experience the language "on-site"*
		2.3.2 Use of English (*n=31*) Ex. *M27: (…) and even if I travel, it doesn't mean I use it (English language)*
3. Affective (*n=169*)	3.1 Language ability (*n=33*)	- Ex. *F18: I've been struggling with languages since I was little*
	3.2 Motivation (*n=104*)	- Ex. *M23: (…) other times low motivation from my side*
	3.3 Anxiety / low self-confidence (*n=32*)	- Ex. *F19: from the fact that I am ashamed to speak in public and the fear of other people's judgments*

Tab. 1. Students' perceptions of leading causes of their difficulties

3.4 Discussion and conclusions

In this study, undergraduate students in Italy were tasked with self-assessing their English proficiency, identifying their strengths and weaknesses, and articulating the challenges they face in learning the language. Overall, students rated their proficiency as intermediate or below, corresponding roughly to the CEFR B1 level. According to CEFR descriptors, this level implies the ability to understand and communicate on familiar topics in daily life, albeit with some limitations in complexity and fluency.

When evaluating their strengths and weaknesses, students predominantly identified written comprehension and written production as their strongest areas. This emphasis on written skills was mirrored in their perceived weaknesses, highlighting deficiencies in oral expression and vocabulary. This disparity underscores existing evidence suggesting that English language education in Italy often prioritizes written and grammatical aspects over oral

proficiency (Faez 2011; Serragiotto, 2012). The persistence of traditional teaching methods, particularly the grammar-translation approach, appears to contribute to this imbalance, neglecting oral communication skills crucial for real-world interaction.

Participants also expressed frustration with the disconnect between their knowledge of grammar rules and their ability to apply them effectively. As two (among many others) students wrote: "I know the rules but I don't know how to apply them"; "At school they (teachers) focus on grammar exercises, an end to themselves". This discrepancy reflects broader concerns about instructional methods that may focus excessively on form rather than meaningful communication (Long 1991). The study highlights a desire among students for more interactive and practical lessons that foster speaking and listening skills, aligning with previous research emphasizing the importance of contextualized language learning (Loewen et al. 2009).

Issues with teaching quality and teacher turnover emerged as significant barriers to effective language learning. Students reported inadequate English language proficiency among teachers and a preference for instruction in Italian, limiting opportunities for English language practice. The role of teachers in creating engaging and supportive learning environments is crucial, yet challenges persist due to systemic factors and societal attitudes toward language education in Italy.

An important point to note here is that preference and implementations of instructions vary from culture to culture as substantiated by Schulz's (1996, 2001) and that the choice of instruction is very much contingent upon the teaching and learning culture prevailing in the community concerned. For example, in Italy, freedom in teaching is a principle set out in the Italian Constitution (art. 33)[6].   Although teachers choose textbooks and teaching tools, research has previously underlined that learner characteristics may also influence their preferences for a given approach to instructions (Schulz 2001).

Participants in this study long for and expect more interactive and practical lessons, focusing on speaking and comprehension skills rather than rote learning of grammatical rules which alone cannot provide them with robust interaction skills. Similar results outcame in previous research in which learners reported their desire for grammar teaching "to be related to real life" (Loewen et al. 2009: 100). This is particularly relevant since, as already stated by Schulz (1996), and as numerous FL educators and researchers agree, any sizeable discrepancy in teacher and student perceptions regarding the efficacy of instructional practices can be detrimental to learning, regardless of the methodological convictions of the teacher (Green 1993; Horwitz 1988; McCargar 1993).

Issues with teaching quality and teacher turnover emerged as significant barriers to effective language learning. Students reported inadequate English language proficiency among teachers and a preference for instruction in Italian, limiting opportunities for English language practice. The role of teachers in creating engaging and supportive learning environments is crucial, yet challenges persist due to systemic factors and societal attitudes toward language education in Italy. However, school teaching has never been regarded as a prestigious job in Italy. In particular, there has always been a tendency among the public to disregard the role of foreign language teachers (Lopriore 2002). This is coupled with the widespread perception that foreign languages can only be learned abroad or in the many

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[6] However, the choice and use of teaching methods and materials must be consistent with each school's educational offer plan *(POF)*, which, in turn, must be consistent with the general and educational objectives of the different branches and levels of study established at national level National Guidelines for the Curriculum, (Indicazioni   nazionali   per   il   curricolo,   implemented   from   2012.   Retrieved fromhttps://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/51310/DM+254_2012.pdf).

private language schools across Italy, but certainly not within the school system where Italian native speakers teach (*ibid.*)[7]. Nevertheless, some positive aspects have emerged from a more recent study, which identified helping students learn a foreign language as one of the most important values in teachers' system of beliefs (Pezzot 2018). As Mariani (2015) maintains, from a system perspective, it would be impossible to dissociate learners and teachers[8]. One important aspect which seems to emerge from the current study is that poor teaching leads to poor learners, an issue that is far from being new in EFL contexts, as research often underscored the critical role of effective teaching in facilitating second language acquisition and the detrimental effects poor teaching practices can have on student performance (e.g., Khan, Gosh 2016).

Furthermore, exposure to English outside the classroom was identified as a critical factor influencing proficiency, with limited opportunities cited as hindering oral skills development. Research consistently supports the benefits of increased language exposure in enhancing language acquisition (Jahrani & Listia 2023). Efforts to integrate authentic English language materials, such as subtitled media and diverse reading materials, may help bridge this gap and enhance language learning outcomes. In Italy, media and films have played only a minor role in the diffusion of English. In fact, until recently there was a total lack of TV programs/films in the original language with subtitles while released films were only dubbed. A recent study which examined the impact of captions and subtitles on EFL learners' comprehension of English-language TV programs, found that both captions and subtitles significantly enhance understanding and vocabulary acquisition (Pujadas, Muñoz, 2020). As far as reading for pleasure is concerned, research showed that although EFL students are not avid readers, they like reading a wide variety of text genres, with a preference for social media and fiction and have a tendency to read both on paper and on their phone (Fazzi, 2023). Since one of the outcomes of the present study is that ELF learners perceive their written comprehension as a strong asset, we believe that educators should find a way to engage students with different texts across different devices by promoting diverse and engaging content through a wide range of reading materials that cater to different interests.

Affective factors, including motivation and anxiety, were also highlighted as influential in language learning. Motivation has been of great interest to researchers for many years (Gardner & Lambert 1972; Crooks & Schmidt 1991). Gardner and Lambert (1972) suggested that instrumental motivation implies that a second language will be acquired when the learner needs to achieve another goal, such as good grades or access to further education. Although Italian EFL students often begin studying English out of duty rather than pleasure or necessity (Serragiotto 2012), the recognition of the importance of foreign languages (especially English) seems to be on the rise among both EFL learners and their parents.[9]

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[7] If there are reasons for this in the past, they can be found, for example, in the absence of pre-service training up to 1999. Despite the introduction of pre-service programmes encompassing pedagogical training and a practicum in schools, language teachers have always had to be graduates of Languages and Literature programmes, which are characterised by a theoretical orientation, a strong focus on literature and limited provision for language teaching methodology modules and this created generations of language teachers with a strong literary background, but arguably more limited knowledge of teaching methodology (Santipolo 2017).

[8] "It is not possible to consider individual differences exclusively as a 'private problem' of those who learn: one would forget that those who teach also have individual differences" (Mariani 2015:9). Moreover, "more often than not, learning styles are referable to both the student and the teacher and are one of the most visible influences on one's teaching style (*ibid*).

[9] In the 2018 PISA survey, three quarters of Italian parents reported considering whether a school had a focus on foreign languages as one of four main criteria for choosing it for their children (OECD 2018).

Therefore, by understanding and leveraging different types of motivation, teachers and parents can enhance students' engagement and success in learning English.

Language anxiety is also considered a significant factor in the learning process. For instance, speaking in class is an occasion that commonly can increase anxiety. Research has underlined that language learners with high anxiety tend to have poor oral English expression (Trassi et al. 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to deeply analyze the impact of psychological anxiety on students' oral English expression abilities, help students overcome this anxiety, and improve the effectiveness of second language teaching and learning.

The findings suggest several implications for improving EFL education in Italy. There is a clear need to rebalance the curriculum by integrating more opportunities for authentic speaking and listening practice alongside traditional grammar and reading exercises. Teachers play a pivotal role in this process by fostering supportive and engaging learning environments that promote active language use and build students' confidence in oral proficiency.

Additionally, enhancing teacher training and support, along with promoting a more diverse and immersive English language environment both inside and outside the classroom, can help address the identified challenges. Efforts to incorporate multimedia resources, such as subtitled media and digital reading materials, could provide students with additional exposure to English in varied contexts, thereby enhancing their language acquisition and comprehension skills.

In conclusion, successful EFL learning requires a multifaceted approach addressing exposure, instructional methods, teacher quality, and learner motivation. This study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by Italian EFL learners, highlighting areas for improvement in educational practices and policies. Future research should continue to explore these complexities, with a focus on integrating language skills within a communicative framework that prepares students for real-world language use scenarios.

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