

English language teaching and learning at a time of change: Young learners' perceptions of instructional contexts

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ABSTRACT

EN Over the last twenty-five years, English has been introduced into the primary school curriculum around the world at an ever-earlier age. Several research studies on those directly involved in this policy implementation, i.e., young learners, have been carried out, particularly in Europe. The ENRICH Project—aimed at promoting teacher competences necessary for responding to the challenges raised in today's multilingual classrooms across Europe—has explored contexts of teaching/learning in five countries where English language teachers teach learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The project investigated the needs of today's young and adolescent learners, their awareness and understanding of new forms of communication, and their learning through English. The focus of the present article is data collected by means of focus groups in which over 100 participants, aged 11-13, were asked to think back to their role as learners and users of English, thus triggering personal responses and enhancing reflections on their learning experiences. The analysis of young learners' statements revealed their positioning in terms of awareness of English language teaching and of the current role of English in multilingual contexts.

Key words: ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING, ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA, YOUNG LEARNERS, FOCUS GROUP, QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

ES En los últimos veinticinco años, la enseñanza del inglés se ha introducido en las escuelas primarias de todo el mundo a una edad cada vez más temprana. Además, en las últimas décadas se han llevado a cabo varios estudios, en especial en Europa, sobre quienes están directamente involucrados en la implementación de esta política: los estudiantes muy jóvenes. El proyecto Erasmus+ ENRICH –que promueve las competencias docentes necesarias para responder a los desafíos que surgen en las aulas multilingües en toda Europa– exploró las prácticas de enseñanza/aprendizaje en cinco países donde el profesorado de inglés enseña a estudiantes de diferentes contextos lingüísticos y culturales. Asimismo, este proyecto investigó las necesidades de los estudiantes (niños/as y adolescentes), su conocimiento y comprensión de nuevas formas de comunicación y del aprendizaje a través del inglés. La presente investigación se enfoca en los datos recopilados a través de una serie de grupos focales donde se invitaron a más de 100 participantes, con edades entre los 11 y los 13 años. Se les pidió a los participantes que reflexionaran sobre su rol como aprendices y usuarios del inglés, lo que provocó respuestas personales y más detalladas sobre sus experiencias de aprendizaje. El análisis de las reflexiones de los jóvenes estudiantes reveló sus posturas en términos de conocimiento de la enseñanza del inglés y del rol que tiene este idioma en contextos multilingües.

Palabras clave: DIDÁCTICA DE LA LENGUA INGLESA, INGLÉS COMO LENGUA FRANCA, APRENDICES JÓVENES, GRUPO FOCAL, ANÁLISIS CUALITATIVO

IT Da oltre venticinque anni l'insegnamento della lingua inglese è stato introdotto nelle scuole primarie di tutto il mondo in età sempre più precoce. In particolare in contesto europeo sono stati condotti molti studi sui giovani apprendenti direttamente coinvolti nell'attuazione di questa politica. Il Progetto Erasmus+ ENRICH – finalizzato alla promozione delle competenze degli insegnanti necessarie a rispondere alle sfide che le classi multilingui pongono in tutta Europa – ha esplorato pratiche di insegnamento e apprendimento in cinque Paesi in cui docenti di lingua inglese insegnano a studenti provenienti da diversi contesti linguistici e culturali e ha indagato i bisogni degli studenti (ragazzi/e e adolescenti), la loro consapevolezza e comprensione di nuove forme di comunicazione e di apprendimento attraverso l'inglese. Il punto focale della presente ricerca si colloca sui dati raccolti attraverso una serie di focus group durante i quali oltre 100 partecipanti, di età compresa tra gli 11 e 13 anni, sono stati invitati a considerare il loro ruolo di studenti e utenti di inglese, fornendo opinioni personali e riflessioni sulle loro esperienze di apprendimento. L'analisi del discorso ha messo in luce le posizioni dei giovani studenti sulla didattica dell'inglese e sul ruolo di questo in contesti multilingui.

Parole chiave: DIDATTICA DELLA LINGUA INGLESE, INGLESE COME LINGUA FRANCA, GIOVANI APPRENDENTI, FOCUS GROUP, ANALISI QUALITATIVA

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1. Introduction

The spread of English as a global lingua franca (ELF) and the impact of the related sociolinguistic phenomena are nowadays unquestionable, especially when the use of English as a shared common language is frequent in migration contexts or in multilingual professional settings, such as institutions, diplomacy, trade, or tourism. Across these settings, speakers from different socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds exchange messages for communicative purposes. As a result of these increasing global phenomena, the sociolinguistic realisations of English and the growing diffusion of World Englishes have received considerable scientific attention in the last two decades in terms of language use and language teaching/learning (e.g., Graddol, 2006; Lopriore, 2016; Pennycook, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2009). The emergence of new linguistic landscapes, affecting English Language Teaching (henceforth, ELT), reveals the importance of considering current societal changes and their impact on education and on teacher education in defining innovative approaches and trends in language teaching. In this sense, the research focus of this study is on the exploration of learners' perceptions, attitudes, and practices, and the role they may have nowadays on language teaching as well as on teacher training, starting from issues of identity, teaching practices, proficiency levels, intercultural communication, and the language awareness of young learners.

Data presented in the following sections originate from the ENRICH project (see Section 2.1) which provided innovation in fields such as: language teacher education (since it helped teachers develop particular competences necessary for preparing learners to effectively use English as it is used among people with diverse mother tongues); English language teaching and learning (since it promoted an innovative view of the English classroom by embracing and enriching the linguistic repertoire of all learners through a dynamic, variable and mutually shared language); continuous professional development (CPD) for EL teachers (since it integrated face-to-face tasks and reflective activities through a blended learning approach, promoting collaborative professional enquiry and peer-learning through networking).

To this end, the ENRICH team preliminarily collected information from EL teachers through a questionnaire about current ELT practices, as well as personal beliefs and attitudes regarding ELT and new instantiations of English. Similar information was acquired from English language learners regarding their individual language learning habits, perceptions, and preferences. The learners' group was divided into two groups: young learners (11-13 years) and adolescents (14-17 years) so as to carefully explore their diverse needs and conditions. In this study, the research focus and investigation will be on the former group of learners and on the results of a qualitative data analysis based on their responses.

2. Theoretical background and research focus

2.1. Teaching English to young learners

The introduction of foreign languages into the primary curriculum has been the most relevant development in language education policy around the world over the last 25 years. In the majority of countries, the English language is taught and at an ever-earlier age. To support this change, considerable investments in pre-service and in-service early primary teacher education have been made over the last years. To date, a relatively large amount of research has been carried out in a wide geographical area to teach English to young learners from the point of view of language policy, of teaching practices and lesson planning, and of teacher education. It especially concerns the gap between policy and practice caused by the introduction of new methodologies and approaches such as communicative language teaching (e.g., in Western contexts: Benvenuto & Lopriore, 2000; Costa & Pladevall Ballester, 2020; Enever, 2011; Garton & Copland, 2018; Lopriore, 2014, 2015; Lopriore & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011; Nunan, 2011; Pinter, 2017).

Among others, a detailed insight of the policy and implementation processes for early foreign language learning programmes has been provided in the European context by the Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE; Enever, 2011) study which provided a tool to guide policy-makers thanks to a transnational, longitudinal approach to understanding and investigating the effectiveness of the teaching of languages in primary schools in a range of seven European countries. The research gives evidence of the benefits, as well as of the challenges, of early start programmes faced by learners, thanks to the analysis of data from over 1,400 children, their schools, teachers, and parents in different national contexts.

The term *young learner* is often used in the ELT profession to refer to any learner under the age of 18. As underlined by Ellis (2014), "it is used by private language providers, publishers, and exam boards; however, it is rarely used by parents or professionals in mainstream education or Ministries of Education" (p. 75).

However, an unambiguous definition is needed to unequivocally identify the target group under investigation, in spite of different education systems and/or school levels in each country. In this regard, different sources might be considered. In general, as mentioned before, the term “young learner” refers to any child under the age of 18 as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) defines *child* as a person below the age of 18, unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood earlier. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)¹ defines the youth population as those people aged less than 15, while in other contexts they are primary-level students aged from approximately 6/7 to 11/12, or students who are not adolescents yet. “Young learners,” therefore, is a generic term that encompasses a wide range of learners who, unlike adults, share commonly accepted needs and rights as children but differ as learners in terms of their physical, psychological, social, emotional, conceptual, and cognitive development, as well as their literacy (Aitchison, 1997).

As for ELT, a very different set of terms describing children of different ages is used, especially with reference to specialized skills and teaching approaches (see Table 1). These labels may cause misunderstandings and make it difficult for ELT professionals to share knowledge and practices and avoid generalizations, as outlined by Enever and Moon (2010) who argue that “more precise descriptors are needed today, to ensure that age-appropriate approaches to teaching and learning are fully developed” (p. 2).

Table 1

Terms used to describe learners in the ELT profession (adapted from Ellis, 2014)

Life stage	Age range	Terms commonly used in the ELT profession	Proposed terms aligned to those commonly used in educational systems
Pre-schooler (also referred to as pre-primary, early years, nursery, kindergarten)	2-5 years	Kids; little ones/people/learners; very young learners; early starters; young learners	Early years/pre-primary
Primary school pupil	6-10/11 years (often further broken down into blocks of years or stages)	Kids; young learners; primary; juniors; tweens	Primary
Secondary school pupil	11-14 years	Kids; young learners; secondary; tweens; teens; early teens; teenagers; juniors	Lower secondary
Secondary school pupil	15-17 years	Kids; young learners; young adults; seniors; teens; late teens; teenagers	Upper secondary
University/vocational student	18-25 years	Adults; young adults	University/further education

Data presented in this study (and derived from the ENRICH Project) cover a sample of young learners who are secondary school pupils aged between 11 and 13. This choice is due to the research objective of investigating learners’ language learning habits and preferences, as well as their educational history and their belonging to special groups of migrants or refugees, with the ultimate aim of comparing their voices with those of older adolescents (see Section 2.3).

2.2. Young learners’ voices

Nonetheless, although most learners of English around the world are children or adolescents, research on young language learners’ perceptions and views of teaching and learning strategies and the outcomes of early language teaching policies is still underdeveloped in comparison to other learner groups and research contexts. This may be due to the fact that studies involving young learners require important methodological and ethical considerations. Researchers should consider children’s vulnerability and their need for protection. Moreover, in the past, a common idea was that children were not able to participate in research because of their

¹ <https://data.oecd.org/pop/young-population.htm>

undeveloped cognitive, communicative or social skills (Mayall, 2000; Scott, 2000). Studies show instead that young learners are in fact capable of providing reliable evidence if approached in ways that engage and empower them, and of developing their awareness of self and language learning, as well as their ability to reflect and elaborate on these issues (Mihaljević Djigunović & Lopriore, 2011; Scott, 2000). Several researchers have highlighted the need for more studies on learner perspectives including Mihaljević Djigunović (2016), who calls for more studies on young learners' perspectives and perceptions of how classroom practices affect their learning process and willingness to interact. However, some exceptions can be reported, e.g., in Greene & Hogan, 2005; Pinter & Zandian, 2015; Sairanen & Kumpulainen, 2014, where young learners are observed as valuable and capable subjects and active social actors whose voices and views should be heard and considered, rather than being objects of research studies.

2.3. ELF and the ENRICH Project

Moreover, research has shown that there is an urgent need to raise language teachers', teacher educators', educational policy-makers', and researchers' awareness of the current role of English as the most frequently employed means of international and intercultural communication, i.e., a global lingua franca (ELF), in educational and professional contexts (e.g., Bayyurt & Dewey, 2020; Bayyurt & Sifakis, 2015; Dewey & Patsko, 2018; Galloway, 2018; Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011; Llurda, 2004, 2018; Lopriore, 2016, 2017; Lopriore & Vettorel, 2016; Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011; Sifakis, 2019; Sifakis & Bayyurt, 2018). In such contexts, English is the language of choice among people who come from different language and cultural backgrounds and need to communicate. Mauranen (2018, p. 7) explains that ELF is a "non-local lingua franca" that can be used by anyone anywhere for any given purpose.

In the light of the above, the Erasmus+ "English as a Lingua Franca Practices for Inclusive Multilingual Classrooms (ENRICH)" Project (<http://enrichproject.eu/>; Cavalheiro et al., 2021) aimed at developing and implementing an innovative and free-of-charge online Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Course. Such an initiative empowers teachers to adapt their teaching practices in view of the role of ELF in today's multilingual and multicultural environments, thanks to a network of researchers from Greece, Italy, Norway, Portugal, and Turkey. Data analysed in the present research study have been collected within the framework of an intensive needs analysis study, carried out to sustain the design and to implement the Professional Development Course (PDC) "ENRICH." The 5-month online course was meant to develop participants' own understanding of the role of English as a lingua franca in multilingual classrooms through an innovative ELF-aware pedagogy (Sifakis, 2019; Sifakis & Bayyurt, 2018).

The in-depth needs analysis, carried out in five countries and investigating EL teachers' (over 600) as well as learners' (over 500) current habits and perceived needs. It aimed to investigate current EL teaching and learning practices, routines, attitudes, and beliefs. It also sought to identify both teachers' and learners' current teaching and learning needs in the diverse ELT educational contexts of the five countries, representing different foreign language curricula and teaching traditions. The countries have all been differently affected by recent migration flows and, consequently, by new scenarios in terms of multilingualism and multiculturalism. In order to develop the needs analysis, the ENRICH team adopted instruments and tools that would be able to investigate both teachers' and learners' current teaching and learning needs, including a growing multilingual population that brings new linguistic landscapes to the classroom. The types of tools used were two multiple choice questionnaires for ELTs and Adolescents (aged 14-17); and the Focus Groups for Young Learners (11-13). While the ENRICH research team decided that questionnaires could be used in English with the teachers, the learners' local language was chosen for the adolescents' questionnaire and the young learners' focus groups, as the most appropriate tool to facilitate their spontaneous responses. Data presented in this research study have been collected during the focus groups carried out in Italian, in 2019, in two local schools in Rome by the local ENRICH Unit at Roma Tre University².

3. The research study

3.1. Rationale, research questions, and context

The following qualitative data analysis is based on a series of focus groups conducted within the ENRICH Project in five different countries. The presuppositions of the present study were that:

² The ENRICH Italian partners—Lucilla Lopriore, Silvia Sperti, Valeria Fiasco and Alessandra Cannelli—worked in the local Unit at the University of Roma Tre.

- 1) the participant young learners' responses to the set of questions were going to challenge current teaching practices, thus unveiling views, metalinguistic abilities (Pinto, Titone & Trusso, 1999), beliefs, and daily routines;
- 2) the conversational approach adopted in the focus group would enhance participants' reactions and comments and would gradually lead to the involvement of all pupils in the exchange of attitudes and habits;
- 3) beliefs, needs, and views would be revealed in the discourse and in the language used by young learners in their responses within the interview guided by a trained interviewer who moderated the encounters.

These hypotheses generated two main research questions:

R.Q. 1 What are the trends in learners' attitudes, awareness, needs, experiences, and ownership of the English language? What, if any, are the dominant trends in their responses?

R.Q. 2 What implications for teacher education traditions and language policies do young learners' reactions and reflections provide, particularly with regard to inclusive and responsive teaching practices?

The focus group organization was guided by a protocol to be closely followed by the people who administered the focus groups in all five countries (see Appendix for full protocol). The total time was 20 minutes and two trained observers used specifically devised grids—with specific codes—to observe the interaction between the interviewer and the pupils. The interaction was not recorded due to privacy issues, but main responses were annotated and later reported through a common format to be analysed. The interviewer had the task of eliciting an open discussion on different topics, using stimulus questions and allowing learners to interact with their mates. The interviewer basically asked them to think back to their own experiences as learners and users of English from different perspectives.

There was a set of four topics that regarded themes and issues, defined in advance, during the needs analysis design (Cavalheiro et al., 2021):

- Knowledge & schemata on English language use and learning
- Attitudes & ELT awareness
- Out-of-school experience & personal skills
- Intercultural awareness & exposure to multilingualism.

This list of topics corresponded to a series of questions aimed to trigger personal responses and enhance reflections on learners' learning experiences (see Section 4.1).

3.2. Young learners' profiles and data collection procedure

Krueger (1994, p. 6) defines a focus group as "a carefully planned discussion, designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment." The aim of a focus group is to produce qualitative data that provide insights into the attitudes, perceptions, motivations, concerns and opinions of participants (Kingry et al., 1990; Krueger, 1994) while generating a collective consciousness (McElroy, 1997). Focus groups employ an interviewing technique, with cooperative discussion taking place under the guidance of a moderator. The moderator facilitates the group discussion in a non-directive and unbiased way, using pre-determined questions. A second moderator is often present, acting as note taker, observing group interactions, and monitoring the technical equipment, but not participating in the ongoing interaction.

In the last two decades, focus groups have been increasingly adopted in research studies involving children and young people. The majority of publications concerns health education and health psychology to explore children's views and perspectives on a variety of topics. Research methodologies have been developed to design the least intrusive tools to be preferred for young children. Hence, focus-group interviews should help them to express their ideas in a more comfortable atmosphere and to get inspired from one another. As a consequence, in focus-group interviewing the researcher not only controls the progress of the discussion but also gathers the participants' ideas resulting from their interaction. In this respect, "the researcher may thereby elicit a richer data set than if he or she is conducting individual interviews" (Nunan & Bailey, 2009, p. 315).

In this research study, as already mentioned in Section 1.3, the focus groups were organized in each country involved in the project and proved to be very successful as the overall design and the role of the interviewer easily stimulated learners' interventions and spontaneous exchanges. The number of learners was limited to 5, including multilingual learners, chosen by the classroom teacher according to the research protocol which was especially devised in order to facilitate and enhance communication on a series of questions covertly underlying issues and topics selected by the ENRICH team in the needs analysis design. One hundred young learners aged between 11 and 14, 20 from each of the five countries, 48% male and 52% female responded³.

The Italian local unit interviewed a total of 20 young learners, 12 male and eight female, all aged 13. Fifty percent of them were Italian while the other 50% were second-generation pupils (whose parents were of Bengali, Cape Verdean, Filipino, Nigerian, Romanian, and Russian origins). The author led the focus groups; two other researchers and teacher educators accurately reported their interventions and took notes without intervening and one interviewer asked questions following the sequence of questions from the protocol (see Appendix). The focus groups were carried out in four sessions in two local lower secondary schools using Italian.

As for the English learning context where participants operate on a daily basis, in Italian lower secondary schools, like those where the focus groups were carried out, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes take place three hours a week, with a total amount of 99 hours per year. At a primary level, pupils attend one hour of English classes in the first grade, two hours in the second grade, three hours in the third, fourth and fifth grades. The most common teaching methods used are traditional lessons, including exercises and group work. Teachers choose textbooks and teaching tools that are consistent with the national curriculum and the school's educational offer plan. As for assessment, the periodic and annual evaluation of pupils focuses on the learning process, their behaviour and their overall learning outcomes. These assessments should be consistent with the learning objectives established in the educational offer plan of each school. At the end of every term and every school year, the teacher assigns the final marks to each student.

Respondents were divided into small groups and the interviews were conducted in one of the school classrooms. Learners sat in a semicircle, with the observers at two different desks on both sides of the semicircle, and the interviewer stood in front of the semicircle and asked questions in Italian. No other students or teachers participated. Firstly, one of the observers introduced the project and the aims. Notes taken during the interviews were then accurately translated into English. The respondents' statements and answers to the researchers' questions could have been influenced by the school context and the implicit power hierarchies in this context. However, pupils who were involved in the focus groups generally appeared relaxed and at ease.

As mentioned above, English young learners responded to questions related to topics and issues identified by the ENRICH team (see Section 4.2), such as:

- learners' knowledge of the curriculum and of ELT,
- learners' understanding of multilingualism/intercultural communication/ELF,
- expectations for future uses of English
- exposure to/ use of English inside and outside the classroom
- learning strategies, preferences and skills awareness & development

These questions had the aim of assessing their awareness of the potential of using another language and their self-confidence in using the language.

The analysis of the outcome was a qualitative one. Specific aspects related to learners' awareness of ELT, their experiences, their knowledge of the role of English and about multilingualism, emerged and provided relevant inputs and hints for reflection. The freedom of the focus group format allowed learners' responses to be quite varied and provided good insight into learners' perception of their language learning experience. When, for example, asked about the first thing, image or sound that came to their mind when they thought of English, the young learners' responses were classified in terms of the learners' use of imagination, their expectations, background schemata and their use of English outside the school.

³ This study complies with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and European Union legislation on research ethics. Participants' privacy was fully protected and all responses given by young learners are totally anonymous and can only be used for research purposes within the ENRICH Project.

4. Data analysis: discourse and meaning

4.1. Data sampling and research method

The ENRICH team agreed on the idea of using focus groups with young learners since interviewing young learners in a relaxing environment and in a discursive mode would allow them to react personally as well as to interact with their mates. In order to define the protocol to be carried out by the focus group in each country and to reduce the risk of getting data that were not conducive, the research team collected background information about educational contexts and multilingual school population (and especially the presence of migrants and refugees); the professional profile of ELT teachers in multilingual classrooms; the number of ELT hours the learners had been exposed to, and if they also study a second foreign language; the status of multilingualism in their country and of exposure to English; the current system of integration of migrants/refugees and if there are separate systems; the current status of integration of refugees/migrants in the school/education system.

As suggested by the previous research questions (see Section 3.1) the main aims of the young learners' focus groups were to:

- 1) Record their needs and wants, in terms of what they actually wanted to learn in the English classroom and how;
- 2) Understand the way they used English (alongside other languages) in the classroom to communicate with their teacher and classmates, ICT use (apps, etc.) outside the classroom for real-life communicative purposes, and the way they expected they may do so in the future, e.g., for social, academic or professional purposes.

The researchers discussed these macro-objectives and created four sets of stimulus questions to encourage learners' replies and exchanges. At the end of this process, the ENRICH team agreed on the protocol to be used during the focus groups, which included the following four main questions to be asked by the interviewer:

- 1) When you think of English, what is the first thing / image / sound / that comes to your mind?
- 2) Is English one of your favourite subjects at school?
- 3) What is your favourite website / app / game among those that use predominantly English? Why?
- 4) In your class do you ever talk about English speaking peoples and cultures other than British, American, or Australian? How often and about what?

Data collected during the focus groups, thanks to the assistance of the two observers who took notes, were then translated into English and coded in specific grids meant to ensure complete and careful qualitative data processing. By coding data, specific units of analysis, such as statements, moves, and individual interventions, were tagged and stored for further investigation. As a first step, some categories were outlined according to the issues and the key themes behind the sets of questions that the interviewer asked during the focus group (see Table 2 below). This first data processing was useful to provide the basis for a qualitative data analysis of the structural features of the responses given by the young learners.

In order to code the macro-features of the resulting transcripts, sections dealing with a specific topic and overlapping discourse strands were identified, especially when supporting or eliciting questions had been used to encourage the exchange of opinions and to close a set of questions before moving to another topic. Once the conversational structure had been defined (the alternation of moves among the interviewer and the interviewees), data were analysed according to individual statements with the aim of examining how and what they represent in the respective discourse strand. In this perspective, lexical features and vocabulary were examined, in terms of register as well as semantic fields, to identify common features and consequently regularities signalling a logic behind the statements of each speaker.

The qualitative data analysis was carried out on the elaborate notes taken from the responses given in Italian, also considering the role of grammar and syntactical features, especially the use of pronouns, adjectives and adverbs, modal and auxiliary verbs, and active versus passive phrases. These features might provide more information about personal beliefs and judgements, expectations and positioning, and attitude towards certain topics. Another important element that was considered consisted in the use of rhetorical figures (metaphors, similes, idioms, or sayings) that help to interpret and explain replies and comments, which in this case were particularly influenced by the limits of the protocol used and, thus, to be handled with care and attention.

4.2. Themes and issues

As already pointed out, in the first part of the research project, mainly devoted to the design of tools and the creation of questionnaires, the team created a list of topics and issues to be turned into feasible questions for the focus groups:

- 1) Learners' knowledge of the curriculum and of ELT;
- 2) Learners' knowledge/understanding of ELT terms;
- 3) Learners' understanding of CEFR levels;
- 4) Understanding of multilingualism/intercultural communication/ELF;
- 5) Expectations for future uses of English, e.g., for social, academic or professional purposes;
- 6) Their exposure to/use of English: identification of contexts, of usefulness;
- 7) English outside the classroom for real-life communicative purposes;
- 8) Their "institutional learning" (i.e., learning in schools/centres): pros & cons;
- 9) Materials & Coursebooks: pros & cons;
- 10) Presence of non-native speakers, migrants, refugees: experience, pros & cons for language learning;
- 11) Intercultural awareness;
- 12) Learning preferences;
- 13) Development of learning strategies;
- 14) Skills awareness & development: listening, speaking, reading, writing, interacting, mediating;
- 15) Use of self-assessment.

This list of topics helped in the coding of data and in the analysis of statements at a later stage (see Section 5). As for the inner structure that composes the set of data, four main topics related to corresponding research objectives and to the previous list of themes were selected and taken into consideration. These were identified in the preliminary needs analysis of the ENRICH project and include: attitude to English teaching and learning; awareness of effective communication; self-awareness of their use of English; attitude towards accuracy; use of communication strategies; exposure to English and to other languages; intercultural awareness. The four question groups are represented in Table 2.

Table 2

Categories and sets of questions used for designing and conducting the focus groups (Cavalheiro et al., 2021)

Focus group protocol	Main topic	Main question	Research objectives
Question Group 1	Knowledge/schemata	When you think of English, what is the first thing/image/sound that comes to your mind?	The responses were classified in terms of the learners' use of imagination, their expectations and their use of English outside the school.
Question Group 2	Attitudes/ELT awareness	Is English one of your favourite subjects at school?	The responses were classified in terms of the learners' attitudes, needs and/or criticism of teaching practices.
Question Group 3	Experience/skills	What is your favourite website/app/game among those that use predominantly English? Why?	The responses were classified in terms of the learners' habits and self-awareness in the language classroom.
Question Group 4	Intercultural awareness/multilingualism	In your class, do you ever talk about English speaking peoples and cultures other than British, American or Australian? How often and about what?	The responses were classified in terms of intercultural awareness and multiculturalism.

In all five countries, data were explored and investigated by way of a textual investigation of the replies that were reconstructed after the focus groups by the team of researchers in charge of the data collection. This methodology also offers the opportunity to carry out a comprehensive analysis meant to monitor and analyse learners' responses to the interview by following the set of topics given by the four protocol components, ranging from background schemata to intercultural awareness. In each of the four main components, the replies chosen for the analysis were those regarded as the most significant for signalling specific needs and occurring changes, where it is expected for participants to use more complex and articulated textual and rhetorical devices.

4.3. Data analysis and findings

As mentioned before, the data analysis took into consideration the most relevant passages in the interactional processes occurring during each focus group. More precisely, special attention was devoted to questions geared at eliciting learners' positioning on English language learning and teaching practices, and to traces of changes and of a shift in perspective, e.g., through the use of lexis and of textual strategies that emerged in the participants' discourse. Data coded in specific grids, thus, granted a closer view of the language choices that had been made by the participants to express their beliefs, needs and opinions, and to relate them to the main topics raised by the set of questions employed by the interviewer.

In the following paragraphs data are presented according to the four question groups that were adopted during the interviews. The data analysis will reveal occurring changes and current behaviours among young learners in relation to English language learning and use.

4.3.1. Question Group 1: Knowledge and schemata on using/learning English

At the beginning of each focus group learners were asked:

- 1) *When you think of English, what is the first thing/image/sound that comes to your mind?*

After the first roundtable, the interviewer intervened with other supporting questions on the role and the function of learning English nowadays aimed at stimulating discussions about persisting schemata, such as:

- 2) *Do you think English will be useful to you in the future? Who do you think you are going to use it with mostly? Why will English be useful to you?*
- 3) *Do you ever use English outside of school? If yes, tell me when, how, with whom... In which situations outside school were you able to use English: any examples?*
- 4) *What do you do when you don't understand something when talking to other people in English? How do you solve such problems?*

Questions 2-4 relate to the main topic of the first question group (namely background knowledge and perceptions on English), in that they link the ideas and images that emerged in the replies to Question 1 to everyday experiences, as well as future projections of using English and the reasons why it is worth learning.

Moreover, when needed, the interviewer resorted to eliciting questions to better identify practices, needs and beliefs. These questions also provided access to other supporting information, such as the need for private supplementary courses or practices of translanguaging and code-mixing outside the school.

As shown in Table 3, vocabulary and lexical choices (e.g., *funny, useful, important; chat, videogames; play, laugh, solve*), as well as the use of modals (e.g., *can, must, will*), reveal young learners' attitudes, views and expectations about the use and the usefulness of English in their present and future. Sometimes the meaning was explicitly made clear, especially when referring to strategies and exposure (e.g., *If I don't understand something I say "can you repeat please"*), while in other cases vagueness and ambiguity emerged in relation to self-awareness and proficiency level (e.g., *Usually I don't have problems. I use English to make jokes and people usually laugh*).

In Table 3, replies to the first main question and corresponding supporting questions are presented according to the discourse categories identified in the processing of data. Extracts have been selected among

the complete dataset for their representativeness in terms of attitudes, awareness, needs, and experiences. Words in **bold** signal lexical, syntactical, rhetorical, and textual features examined in the data analysis.

Table 3

Set of key topics and extracts from the first question group

Topics & issues	Extracts
1.1 English language and associations participants make	<p>Main images and schemata used:</p> <p>(S1) <i>British or American flag</i></p> <p>(S2) <i>England or UK map</i></p> <p>(S3) <i>Big Ben and London monuments</i></p> <p>(S4) <i>American Football</i></p> <p>(S5) School</p> <p>(S6) A violin sound (at the beginning is complicated then it is pleasant, you need practice)</p> <p>(S7) The world, the planisphere</p> <p>(S8) <i>It is an international language. The language.</i></p>
1.2 Usefulness of English in the future	<p>(S1) Better work in my future life</p> <p>(S2) Yes, to travel, to study</p> <p>(S3) Yes, but I already use it to communicate with some Americans for some championships</p> <p>(S4) Useful because we are not alone, there are not only Italians</p> <p>(S5) Yes, because there are jobs that use English, where you must know English</p> <p>(S6) If you can speak English you can communicate with everyone</p> <p>(S7) Yes, even if I won't attend a foreign language high school, I have chosen to improve my English skills through the Cambridge qualifications because English is the most spoken language nowadays. Anyway, I like it!</p> <p>(S8) It will be useful for work and for travelling to America or England</p> <p>(S9) After University, I would like to move to England</p> <p>(S10) Yes, because English is the most spoken language nowadays, everyone speaks English therefore it is important if I go abroad</p> <p>(S11) Yes, I don't know specifically what I'll do in the future but I think that it will be useful</p> <p>(S12) Yes, I will move to England therefore if I can speak English it's easier. It is the most spoken language in the world</p> <p>(S13) It's important to know other languages therefore I think that in the future it will be useful for work purposes</p> <p>(S14) If I go abroad it will be useful to communicate with other people. I would like to be a footballer and I think that it would be an invaluable experience to go to England to learn how they play and to work there</p>
1.3 Use of English outside school	<p>(S1) Yes, after school to do homework and in the English private courses</p> <p>(S2) I also use it with my brother who studies and uses it</p> <p>(S3) Yes, during my football training, all my sports terminology is in English</p> <p>(S4) To watch videos or listen to music</p> <p>(S5) Yes, my uncle speaks English</p> <p>(S6) Yes, I use English on my own!</p> <p>(S7) Just at school</p> <p>(S8) Yes, playing videogames.</p> <p>(S9) Yes, I often write English sentences and I have an English penfriend who lives in England</p> <p>(S10) Yes, I use English to give street directions to tourists (also to non-English speakers)</p> <p>(S11) Not often. Sometimes I use some English expressions or words to make funny jokes with my friends or my parents. English gives the idea</p> <p>(S12) At home with my parents and using video calling with my cousins</p> <p>(S13) I don't use English outside school, but once a tourist asked my mother something and she wasn't able to answer, so I answered to the tourist</p> <p>(S14) Yes, I use English when I play with the Play Station system and online videogames</p>

	(S15) Yes, Filipino is a melting pot of many languages, English included. I use it with my parents and my family
	(S16) I attend a Cambridge course (KET) at school. Nowadays many English words are also used into Italian in different areas like technology , e.g., computers. I set my iPhone in English
	(S17) Yes, I do. My aunt speaks English for work purposes and sometimes I speak English with her
	(S18) Yes, last year I attended a Trinity course at school. I use English with my Italian friends to make jokes and laugh. We make conversations in English and we don't know how to say some words we use Italian, therefore we speak Italian/English

1.4 Strategies when you do not understand	(S1) I was in Amsterdam and I was buying a sandwich and I didn't know how to say it so I used gestures
	(S2) Usually I don't have problems but if I don't understand something I use gestures.
	(S3) If I don't understand something I say "can you repeat please," while if I don't know how to say something I say "I don't know"
	(S4) During English oral tests if the teacher doesn't understand me I explain the concept in Italian
	(S5) I use gestures to communicate and otherwise I use Google translator because I don't engage myself into long conversations.
	(S6) Usually I don't have problems. I use English to make jokes and people usually laugh
	(S7) I use English with my parents and when I don't understand something my parents explain in Bengali
	(S8) I use Google translator or I ask my parents
	(S9) Also for me when it is fast but also when I speak to my brother, and if I don't know a word, I use Italian or I use a dictionary
	(S10) Yes, I also had problems for the speed but if I lacked the words I used gestures to solve the problem
	(S11) Yes, when I can't understand, as when I take a test, I may not understand so I ask to speak more slowly or I look up in the dictionary
	(S12) I also ask for help and try to listen twice to understand
	(S13) Yes, when I play with PlayStation I chat with people using English but sometimes they use strange words and I can't understand them. So I usually ask them to repeat but sometimes it doesn't work and they find other ways to let me understand what they mean

4.3.2. Question Group 2: Attitudes and ELT awareness

After the first set of questions the interviewer asked learners:

- 5) *Is English one of your favourite subjects at school?*

Since the question was meant to encourage exchanges on personal attitudes and awareness of teaching practices, some supporting questions were needed, such as:

- 6) *What activity do you like doing best during your English lessons at school? Why?*
 7) *What activity do you like doing least during your English lessons at school? Why?*
 8) *What do you think is missing in your English lessons?*

This second set of questions was particularly complex and specific, and required a certain amount of consciousness, meta-cognitive processes and confidence from the young respondents. Here learners were asked to express and judge their self-awareness of language learning as well as their teachers' teaching practices and missing elements in their lessons. In all sessions some of them showed uncertainty and a feeling of awe towards their teachers. The interviewer helped and guided the exchange which, after the initial unease, turned out to be a constructive and critical exchange of opinions and suggestions, as the discourse strategies reveal. Such exchanges included the use of modal verbs (e.g., *would, would like, should, need*) and of basic textual cohesive devices (e.g., *I like group activities so I would like to do it more often*). English proved to not always be the students' favourite subject for different reasons (e.g., *I hated English because we changed many teachers*), and preferences in terms of language activities were extremely subjective but marked, showing a general

awareness of teaching practices, learning skills and acquisition processes (e.g., *the teacher gives us a text and we have to translate it all together. I like this type of activity; I don't like exercises during the English lesson; I know how to apply a grammar rule but I can't do it!; I like the teacher, she gives many things to do, she's strict; she makes it interesting, she uses Kahoot; we study formal...topics, well, we should get used to using English in practice; our teacher goes too fast and so some of us are left behind*).

In Table 4 replies to the second main question and corresponding supporting questions are presented according to the discourse categories identified in the processing of data. Extracts have been selected among the complete dataset for their representativeness in terms of attitudes, awareness, needs, and experiences. Words in **bold** signal lexical, syntactical, rhetorical, and textual features examined in the data analysis.

Table 4
Set of key topics and extracts from the second Question Group

Topics & issues	Extracts
2.1 English as favourite lesson	<p>(S1) My favourite subject is physical education, but also theoretical subjects like English and French</p> <p>(S2) No, science and mathematics</p> <p>(S3) It is one of my favourite subjects, even if I prefer Italian and Italian literature</p> <p>(S4) At the primary school, it wasn't because I didn't understand some words. Now it's my second favourite subject and I like it because it is easier than Italian, it is funny and it has a beautiful sound</p> <p>(S5) I like English, even if it is not my favourite subject. I like English words and English culture. It is easier than other foreign languages</p> <p>(S6) At the primary school I hated English because we changed many teachers. During the middle school I like it more than before</p> <p>(S7) My favourite subject is maths and I would like to study it in English</p> <p>(S8) It is one of my favourite subjects because it is easy to understand. Through English I can communicate with other people</p>
2.2 Most favourite activity	<p>(S1) The activity I like most is when at the end of the lesson we can play with games like Buzz and Pistolero</p> <p>(S2) The activity I like most is listening because we are not as good as the teacher, therefore I like hearing the English sound when the teacher reads. I like listening to the English accent and listening activities as well</p> <p>(S3) Group activities because they are funny</p> <p>(S4) The teacher gives us a text and we have to translate it all together. I like this type of activity</p> <p>(S5) Topics related to culture that are included in the coursebook or the teacher find them and give them us</p> <p>(S6) When I read I like the English accent and I would like to improve it. Then I like grammar and doing grammar exercises.</p> <p>(S7) The activity I like most is writing sentences and correcting homework by using the interactive whiteboard</p> <p>(S8) The activity I like most is listening, conversations and writing conversations</p> <p>(S9) The activity I like most is learning new words</p> <p>(S10) The activity I like most is writing English and listening</p> <p>(S11) I like listening while it's hard for me to pronounce some words</p>
2.3 Least favourite activity	<p>(S1) I don't like exercises during the English lesson. I don't want to do them</p> <p>(S2) I hate irregular verbs</p> <p>(S3) When I don't like a given topic, like irregular verbs and grammar rules are very hard for me. I know how to apply a grammar rule but I can't do it!</p> <p>(S4) I can't understand some grammar rules even if the teacher explains them, it's hard for me</p> <p>(S5) My least favourite activity is listening because it's hard</p> <p>(S6) I find hard to learn vocabulary because we have to learn many words</p>

	(S7) <i>For me the hardest activity is listening</i>
	(S8) <i>For me the hardest activity is reading</i>
2.4 What is missing during English lessons	(S1) <i>I like group activities so I would like to do it more often to speak with other classmates</i>
	(S2) <i>I like speaking and group activities. In the afternoon I attend a Cambridge course at school as well</i>
	(S3) <i>I like speaking activities but I would suggest that I would like to be engaged in a conversation starting from a given topic</i>
	(S4) <i>I like English lessons as they are</i>
	(S5) <i>No, I don't want to change anything, I like it all</i>
	(S6) <i>I like the teacher, she gives many things to do, she's strict</i>
	(S7) <i>I like reading comprehension because you need to understand and answer well, be precise</i>
	(S8) <i>Nothing to change, I like the way teacher teaches, she makes it interesting, she uses Kahoot</i>
	(S9) <i>I like it all, no changes</i>
	(S10) <i>We study formal... topics, well we should get used to using English in practice... I mean, they teach grammar, verbs, formal expressions but I don't know...</i>
	(S11) <i>During the lesson, our teacher goes too fast and so some of us are left behind and she is obsessed always with the same people, you know, she always makes them correct our homework and she takes for granted that everyone is following and doing their homework, always the same people, she believes they are brilliant...</i>

4.3.3. Question Group 3: Personal experience and self-awareness of skills

The exchange then moved towards preferences and daily routines in terms of out-of-school language use. The interviewer asked:

(9) *What is your favourite website/app/game among those that use predominantly English? Why?*

And, when necessary and if not explicitly and spontaneously stated, some supporting questions were added:

(10) *When you engage with these websites/apps/games is your English different in any way from the English you use in class? How? Can you provide examples?*

(11) *How often do you use the app/this website/this game?*

(12) *How often do you use English when you use the app/a game/the website?*

(13) *Have you learnt any English using games? How? What?*

Even if the theme underlying this set of questions is familiar and recurring, some respondents needed eliciting questions to better express and define routines and personal skills. For example:

Eliciting question: how many times a week?

(S1): I watch more Italian videos, let's say 80% Italian 20% English.

Eliciting question: do you watch TV series or films in English?

(S2): No, I don't. I watch Narcos in Spanish. Sometimes I watch TV series in English and I use subtitles.

(S3): I watch films in English and I can understand them.

Eliciting question: can you understand what they say?

(S2): Yes, I do, more or less.

(S4): I don't use apps or videogames in English. I like watching videos on YouTube about English footballers.

Eliciting question: Do you watch interviews?

(S4): Yes, interviews or challenges among different footballers, freestylers.

Eliciting question: can you understand what they say? Do you use subtitles?

(S4): Yes, I can and I don't use subtitles.

Eliciting question: can you understand the words of English songs?

(S1): Yes, most of the times.

(S2): I like listening to English music. Then I like using apps, for example, one of them is a multimedia Japan comic, manga, and I read it in English. I seldom use videogames and I usually have no problems understanding the instructions and the rules.

Eliciting question: when you use these videogames, are you engaged in conversations with the other players?

(S1): Yes, it rarely happens, but when it happens it is easy to understand English conversation.

Eliciting question: Do you think that the English used in these types of conversations is different from the English used at school?

(S1): Yes, it is more fluent because I don't feel scared of making mistakes.

Answering this set of questions was relatively immediate and the interviewer only intervened when replies needed more details. Question Group 2 and Question Group 3 are to be considered as interrelated, and in a way the latter included control questions for the replies given in the former that were addressed in a more relaxed dimension. Vocabulary is related to the semantic fields of gaming and entertainment; text structures are basic, and replies are direct and immediate. Table 5 shows replies to the third main question and corresponding supporting questions are presented according to the discourse categories identified in the grids used to process data. Extracts have been selected among the complete dataset for their representativeness in terms of attitudes, awareness, needs, and experiences. Words in **bold** signal lexical, syntactical, rhetorical, and textual features examined in the data analysis.

Table 5

Set of key topics and extracts from the third question group

Topics & issues	Extracts
3.1 Favourite website/app/game	(S1) <i>I don't remember the name but I use an app written in English, there are both images and words. I like listening to English music</i>
	(S2) <i>All videogames are because they are in English and I learn specific terminology playing. I improved my words, ask teachers and I learn by playing</i>
	(S3) <i>Videogames and telephoning in English. I learn a lot of slang that it is not traditional. I improved a lot of pronunciation by watching TV series</i>
	(S4) <i>PlayStation: I can now speak with other people in English, for example. My English becomes more fluid because I use terms that come from the game, like "pushare." I interact in English while playing. My pronunciation has improved</i>
	(S5) <i>Books in English make me improve because if I meet someone I can speak</i>
	(S6) <i>I don't play a lot, I watch films but I'm not sure I'm improving</i>
	(S7) <i>I use any apps but I rather watch English videos on YouTube</i>
	(S8) <i>I use Fortnight</i>
	(S9) <i>I don't use apps or videogames in English. I prefer watching English TV series</i>
	(S10) <i>I don't use videogames</i>
	(S11) <i>I use an app in English to create objects but it's not a game and when don't understand some words I use Google translator</i>
	(S12) <i>I hardly ever use English videogames</i>
	(S13) <i>I play a videogame in English and I follow an English channel on YouTube where they cook huge sandwiches, it's amazing! It is called Epic meal team. I like listening to English music and English TV series using English subtitles because sometimes I don't understand English words</i>

4.3.4 Question Group 4: Intercultural awareness and multilingualism

To conclude, the interviewer returned to learners' classroom experience and addressed the issues of standard models, exposure to other languages and cultures, and intercultural awareness by means of a set of questions that were specifically designed to collect useful data to this end, especially among multilingual and migrant learners. The starting question was:

(14) *In your class, do you ever talk about English speaking peoples and cultures other than British, American or Australian? How often and about what?*

Moreover, since groups of selected students included students from migrant backgrounds or second-generation pupils, some eliciting questions were used to explore side topics, such as:

(15) *Do you ever talk about your own culture(s)? (either in the English class or in any other class).*

The last set of questions aimed to verify both learners' intercultural awareness and exposure, and teachers' inclusive habits and sensitivity about the plurilingual and pluricultural dimension of their classrooms. Learners consciously answered without hesitation and gave details which confirm that coursebooks and teaching materials are not always updated to the socio-cultural changes that education is experiencing. This is due to global mobility and new linguistic landscapes; in contrast, intercultural competence is often still related to canonical literature or monocultural customs and traditions. Once again, learners' out-of-school experience is likely to bring diversity, plurality and new representations of life to the language classroom in the near future.

In Table 6, extracts from the replies given to the last main question and corresponding supporting questions are presented according to the discourse categories identified in the processing of data. Extracts have been selected among the complete dataset for their representativeness in terms of attitudes, awareness, needs, and experiences. Words in **bold** signal lexical, syntactical, rhetorical, and textual features examined in the data analysis:

Table 6

Set of key topics and extracts from the fourth question group

Themes & issues	Extracts
4.1 Exposure to cultures other than British, American or Australian in class	(S1) Sometimes during the English lessons we focus on culture when we read texts
	(S2) We dealt with Romantic poets in Italy, Byron and Shelley
	(S3) USA, Australia, Romantic poets
	(S4) Thanksgiving or New Zealand on our coursebook
	(S5) We have an Estonian classmate and he studied English in depth, in Estonia they speak English as well, so he is very good in English and his English skills are remarkable. So we help him in Italian.
	(S6) We read texts about America , but our book also includes texts about Australia . We did some tests about the American culture for example thanksgiving, Christopher Columbus, the American flag and politics, American people
	(S7) We explored the American culture . All these topics are included in our course book.
	(S8) Our course book includes other cultures like Australia and other cultures , but I don't remember the other ones! We haven't still dealt with them so I'm waiting to study them!
	(S9) Our teacher doesn't like the USA but when she has to explain the USA she does. She likes India .
	(S10) The teacher talks about the American culture because she was in the USA
	(S11) Now we are doing only grammar, during our second year we did grammar and sometimes culture, such as texts, dialogues and our teacher sometimes showed us on the map some areas of England but now she has said that now we have to focus on grammar and after, to relax, we will focus on culture, new words and lexis...
	(S12) There is only a section on our book, about the USA
	(S13) Sometimes we talk about Indian holidays and festivals
	(S14) About the Caribbean
4.2 Reference to own culture at school	(S1) All: No
	(S2) Yes, we did. We talked about our traditions and our cultures . What we do with our parents

-
- (S3) We have never talked about the Italian culture, but sometimes we can do some exercises to talk about the **things we like most about our culture**, what we do in a personal way
- (S4) We often talk about foreign cultures like **Africa and Asia**
- (S5) Usually, I'm not asked to talk about my culture, but once during the **geography oral test** the teacher asked me to talk about my country
- (S6) We just do grammar, sometimes texts about the UK. One time we read something about the **Grand Canyon...**
- (S7) No, but we read texts about culture, e.g., thanksgiving. After reading the text we had to answer to some questions and in particular there was one asking whether **we have particular traditions or customs**
-

5. Voices from the field: young learners' advice

The analysis of data deriving from the focus groups carried out with young learners, reveal that, first of all, learners are often more aware of teaching practices that are more effective for their learning than their teachers. The importance of responses received by asking learners' habits, perceptions and beliefs about their learning reveals how useful listening to learners' voices is in research studies, especially when a PDC is designed and implemented.

After being transcribed, the data were further examined and interpreted according to special grids where we identified elements related to the four main topics identified in the tool design throughout the participants' responses (see Section 4.1). This last phase of data coding helped in replying to the initial research questions and supporting the research hypotheses (see Section 3.1).

More precisely, the findings proved to be relevant in many respects. Firstly, young learners' attitude towards English, its use and its usefulness, is extremely positive. They are aware and satisfied with the role of English as a global language. This is also due to the fact that, despite their age, they have already experienced the importance of effective communication with other non-native speakers using English as a lingua franca, thanks to social networks and ICTs, and sometimes continue to do so on a daily basis. This also means being exposed to other languages and to the use of communication strategies involving mediation, code-mixing, translanguaging and, if needed, paralinguistic to enhance mutual intelligibility among participants involved in the interactions. However, the data also revealed a lack of awareness of other English cultures, other than British and American ones, and of World Englishes.

In terms of language acquisition, pupils show self-awareness of their use of English and a controversial approach to accuracy and being corrected by their teachers (e.g., *I hate irregular verbs; I feel anxious when I have to apply grammar rules, grammar rules that are hard for me; it's hard for me to pronounce some words*). In this respect, despite several decades of research studies in this area, it is problematic to formulate any conclusions about the topic of error correction and corrective feedback and its impact on language acquisition and development. This is especially evident in light of the so called "communicative revolution" in language teaching (Widdowson, 1978) where learners' success was related to communicative effectiveness rather than formal accuracy. Many researchers have investigated worldwide students' attitudes towards teachers' Corrective Feedback (CF) strategies (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997); the timing of CF (e.g., Sheen & Ellis, 2011); and types of learners' errors that should be corrected (e.g., Calsiyao, 201; Couper, 2019; Hassan & Arslan, 2008; Katayama, 2007; Ustaci, 2014). The majority of these studies' findings proved that CF has made a great contribution to language learning as it facilitates learners in identifying and adjusting their behaviours (e.g., Ancker, 2000; Long, 1991) and making progress in language learning (e.g., Agustuna, Herlina & Faridah, 2019; Lyster, 2013; Saito & Lyster, 2012). In contrast, it could affect students' reactions and motivation in language learning negatively (Alqahtani & Al-enzi, 2011; Ellis, 2009). Moreover, very recently, a change in priorities for teachers of English as a language for international communication and alternative assessment have also been suggested (Newbold, 2017).

To sum up, the final coding of data and the corresponding analysis revealed meaningful results in terms of learners' needs, perceptions and attitudes towards English language use and learning at a time of change. The correspondence between the initial research topics and issues (see Section 4.2) and the main categories identified for the coding and the analysis of data (see Section 4.1) can be summarized as follows in Table 7.

Table 7
Main findings from the data analysis of the focus groups

Key issues in question groups	Notes on categories
Imagination & schemata on English language	English language related to school, learning, global communication, nativeness (UK, USA), standards: e.g., <i>I like English. It is the most spoken language nowadays.</i>
Expectations & representations	English language related to work, study, intercultural communication: e.g., <i>Yes, I will move to England therefore If I can speak English it's easier. It is the most spoken language in the world.</i>
Use of English outside the classroom	ELF & accommodation strategies; Habits: social media, apps, videogames, web: e.g., <i>I use it to give street directions to tourists and they understand me. I use English when I play with the PlayStation and online videogames.</i>
Attitudes to learning English	Positive and responsive: e.g., <i>It's my second favourite subject and I like it because it is easier than Italian, it is funny and it has a beautiful sound.</i>
Use of communication strategies	Frequent and conscious: e.g., <i>If I don't understand something I use gestures.</i>
Criticism of teaching practices & methods	Boring and demanding tasks; need for more interaction, spoken language, group activities: e.g., <i>I like group activity so I would like to do it more often to speak with other classmates.</i>
Self-awareness & language use	Signals of self-confidence, search of authenticity: e.g., <i>I can understand English TV series with English subtitles. I interact in English while playing. My pronunciation has improved.</i>
Multiculturalism & exposure to other languages	Limited and not satisfying: e.g., <i>Sometimes we talk about Indian holidays and festivals. But it doesn't happen so often...</i>

The findings that emerged from the focus groups carried out with young learners were used to plan the ENRICH CPD Course. They show current beliefs and attitudes towards learning and using the English language at an earlier stage of language acquisition. Children and young learners are inevitably influenced by the global changes occurring and affecting their daily life: migrant flows, recent developments in technology, virtual realities and easier and speedier access to knowledge and news, multilingualism, and plurality of English. All these aspects have considerable pedagogical implications and learners' voices, as they are authentic, critical and realistic, cannot be neglected; they have therefore become extremely relevant in terms of suggesting innovations in teacher education and language policies. Hence, as concerns innovations in teacher education and professional development of ELTs, the research approach presented in this study (and applied in the ENRICH project) had the aim of gathering information from learners about the current status and opinions about ELT. As a result, they contributed to developing the internal structure of the CPD Course and may be seen as a considerable improvement to the field that should be encouraged for further studies.

6. Conclusions

The initial hypotheses of the study were mostly confirmed by the results of the data analysis, as the participant learners' responses to the sets of questions, aimed at eliciting their reactions and comments on learning practices and self-awareness on their role as users of English and other languages, confirmed that learners' voices are as relevant and significant as those of their teachers in implementing high-quality continuous professional development. The data analysis succeeded in answering the initial research questions and unveiled common and firm beliefs about the participants' role as learners at school and users outside the classroom. The discursive approach that was adopted during the focus groups stimulated interventions and exchanges, and enhanced participants' self-awareness and a progressive cooperative interactional process that led to the involvement of each speaker in the conversation, guided by the interviewer.

The analysis of the data unveiled how learners not only actively position themselves in relation to innovation as the integration of the out-of-the-school experience in their classrooms confirms, but also suggest innovative approaches and solutions when asked to reflect on teaching practices and habits.

Lastly, the choice of using a data analysis based on specific grids and discursive categories proved to be a powerful tool in investigating learners' language choices in an unusual communicative dimension such as that which is inevitably offered by focus groups. Their discursive strategies unveil participants' perceptions and needs, as well as insights for teachers and trainers, with respect to the current role of English and the new challenges that it is raising in terms of teacher education and of language policies. In fact, in the light of these results (referring to the pre-pandemic period) and after the dramatic experience of the total closure of schools in 2020-2021, it is highly possible that today's responses to the same questions would be even more thoughtful and conscious in terms of educational innovation. As the latest data show (COE, 2020⁴; Indire, 2021⁵), the pandemic forced learners to switch to an online mode of learning where digital-integrated teaching became a complement, and not a substitute, of face-to-face lessons. The sudden transition to technology, virtual teaching spaces and contents that are adapted to distance learning have seriously affected learners' perceptions and self-awareness of their learning processes, especially at a time of crisis when teaching/learning challenges (as well as opportunities) inevitably entailed the overlapping of their own in- and out-of-the school experience.

To conclude, the study highlighted learners' overall understanding and awareness of new communicative processes involving the new international function of English and its different instantiations (first of all, ELF), as well as the expanding role of non-native speakers. Pupils are aware of being learners as well as social agents (CEFR, 2020⁶) and successful communicators by accepting, and adopting forms of translanguaging, communication, mediation and accommodation strategies in daily conversations. They provide their teachers with useful suggestions and indications in terms of the importance of authenticity of tools and tasks in the English classroom; the level of learning satisfaction; the daily out-of-school experience; the use of ICTs and social media; the exposure to other languages and cultures; and learners' awareness of school and family expectations.

All this suggests the urgent need for a widespread reflective teacher education where new instantiations of English(es) are embedded throughout the course components and learners' language experiences are valued in classroom life. It goes without saying that language policies should endorse the successful implementation of this kind of innovations, thus promoting and sustaining learners' voices, suggestions and support with the aim of translating these innovations into successful and sustainable classroom practices.

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⁴ <https://rm.coe.int/making-the-right-to-education-a-reality-in-times-of-covid-19-a-roadmap/16809fee7b>

⁵ <https://www.indire.it/en/2022/02/03/the-report-on-the-impact-of-the-pandemic-on-teaching-is-online/>

⁶ <https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching/16809ea0d4>

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Appendix

YOUNG LEARNERS' FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Place: class or comfortable school room without other students, and preferably with no teachers, possibly sitting in circles or around a table; provide white paper, pencils etc.

Participants:

- 5 students (chosen by classroom teacher, 3 preferably multilingual of different native languages)
- 2 trained observers who will use a specific grid with criteria
- 1 trained interviewer

Content: 4 sets of questions

Question Group 1

Main Question: When you think of English, what is the first thing / image / sound / that comes to your mind?

Supporting Questions:

1. Do you think English will be useful to you in the future? Who do you think you are going to use it with mostly? Why will English be useful to you?
2. Do you ever use English outside the school? If yes, tell me when, how, with whom ... In which situations outside school were you able to use English effectively? Give some examples.
3. What do you do when you don't understand something when talking to other people in English? How do you resolve such problems?
4. If someone doesn't completely understand what you are saying, how do you help him/her understand?

Question Group 2

Main Question: Is English one of your favourite subjects at school?

Supporting Questions:

1. Why? Why not?
2. What do you think is missing in your English lessons?
3. What makes English an enjoyable subject at school?
4. What activity do you like doing best during your English lessons at school? Why?
5. What do you like doing least during your English lessons at school? Why?
6. Is English in any way different from other subjects? If yes, can you provide an example?
7. Why do you learn English?
8. Do you think you need to practise English beyond the English classes? How? Why?

Question Group 3

Main Question: What is your favourite website / app / game among those that use predominantly English? Why?

Supporting Questions:

1. When you engage with these websites / apps / games is your English in any way different from the English you use in class? How? Can you provide examples?
2. How often do you use this app / website/ game?
3. How often do you use English when you use the app /game/ website?
4. Have you learnt any English using games? How? What?

Question Group 4

Main Question: In your class do you ever talk about English speaking peoples and cultures other than British, American or Australian? How often and about what?

Supporting Question:

1. Do you ever talk about your own culture(s)? (either in the English class or in any other class).

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