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Language Foregrounded**
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Teaching and learning foreign languages in multicultural and plurilingual contexts

A critical and intercultural approach to
Foreign Language Education

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Double perspective

■ **teacher**

- I teach English as a Foreign Language to adolescent students from different linguacultural and social backgrounds in an urban context

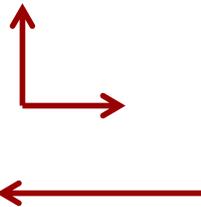
■ **researcher**

- In the years 2010-2012 I conducted a qualitative research study on cross-linguistic interactions among adolescents

*“No knowledge, no language
and no pedagogy is ever
neutral or apolitical”*
(Alastair Pennycook 1994)

—————→ **CRITICAL**

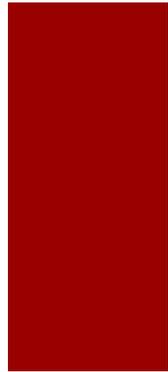
INTERCULTURAL



“Foreign language education
is the prime promoter
of the foreign perspective”
(Claire Kramersch 2009)

**In an era of unprecedented contacts
between languages and peoples,
what is the role of language
education in a critical and
intercultural perspective?**

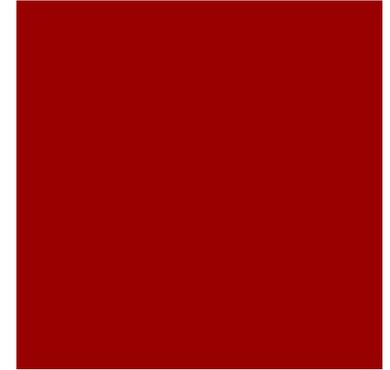
←
↑
—————→ **EDUCATION**



A walk on the Critical side

- critical is a **problematizing practice** connecting **micro** and **macro** relations observing “how the classroom, text or conversation is related to **broader social, cultural** and **political** relations” (Pennycook 2001)
- critical as observing in particular the **relations** between **language** and **power, structure** and **individual agency**, with the intent **not only to unveil** these relations but also to **challenge** them to **equalize** opportunities
- critical as “discovering how **processes** work in specific sites and moments (...), identifying which **resources** are circulating and the **conditions** that make them available (...) and figuring out the **consequences** of these processes” (Heller 2011)

The Critical and FL

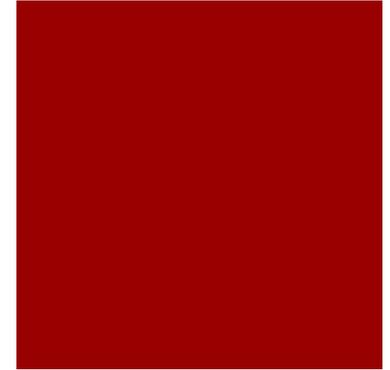


- **FLE can:**
- foreground several issues connected with a **critical view** of what is usually taken-for-granted of **individual** and **collective linguacultural identities**, as well as of **language ideologies**
- dismantle **pregiven narratives** and representations of individuals and groups also investigating how **languages** and **language practices** manifest **asymmetrical status of power** (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004)

The Intercultural space

- the notion of the Intercultural as the **questioning of one's identity in relation to others**, so that the **mutual practice** of being able to meet and interact with **other cultures** becomes **the exercise of problematizing one's own(s)** too

(Gobbo 1992, 2008, 2011; Abdallah Pretceille, 2005, 2006)



The Intercultural space and FL

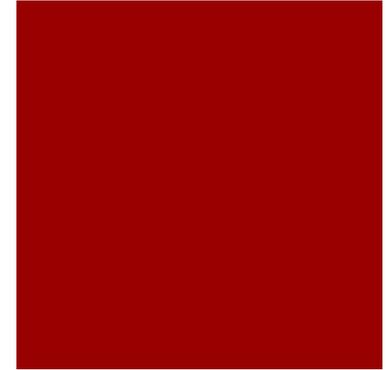
“The experience of the foreign always implies a reconsideration of the familiar” (Claire Kramsch)

- **The experience of a Foreign Language:**

- changes the **perception** and **representation** of the self and others

- **ICC** (Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram 2006); **apprentissage de la diversité** (Abdallah-Preceille 2008);

- redefining the self and the others, the experience of a FL is also connected to a **different emotional perspective** and **representation** (Dewaele 2010)



The 'strange' case of English

■ THE CRITICAL

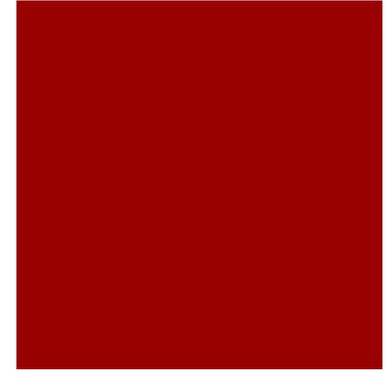
- English(es) in the world: **linguistic imperialism** or a wider opportunity to **speak back**?
- English as **instruction top-down** and English as **appropriation bottom-up: global and local phenomena**
- The **EFL/ELF debate**
- Is still **English a Foreign language** or rather a **global L2**?

■ THE INTERCULTURAL

- “In recent decades we have witnessed significant **geographical, demographic and structural changes to the English language**, and this requires us to revisit notions as ‘language proficiency’. I think no matter how we define language proficiency in today’s world, **intercultural communication skills** should be at the heart of it” (Sharifian 2016)
- is English as international language a **post-**, a **multi-** or an **inter- cultural language**? (interconnection with the ELF/ELF debate)

The study ^{1/3}

- qualitative study aimed at investigating into what happens when **speakers from different mother-tongues** leave their L1(s) to **adopt a common language** for their communications



The study ^{2/3}

■ hypothesis

- the **experience** of a **foreign language** as a way to approach **Otherness** from **within** and **between**

■ aim

- the **intercultural potential** of a language **equally foreign** for both Italian and non-Italian students
- whether the **spontaneous cross-linguistic practices** were isolated episodes or there were **recurring patterns**, and which were the **characteristics** of these patterns
- what these patterns can tell us as teachers and educators about the **dynamics** of **foreign language use** and how they can inform and direct our teaching practice to engage students towards **a critical language acquisition**

The study ^{3/3}

■ participants and conditions

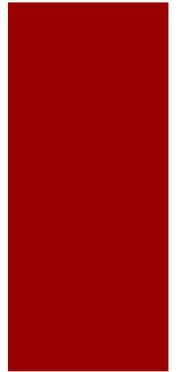
- 62 students of both Italian and non-Italian origins from different linguacultural backgrounds
- English as not the dominant or target language for anyone
- voluntary participation, no compensation
- none of the students was or had been one of my students or former students

■ context

- two high schools in Turin, NW of Italy, different for curricula and for the students' socio-cultural background

■ methodology

- field observation of cross-linguistic practices (Englishes/other languages)
- quanti-qualitative linguistic questionnaire
- back-talk focus groups



The study: some findings ^{1/3}

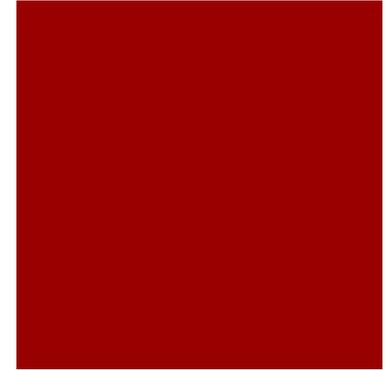
quantitative data

45 students out of **62** (72.58%) do **not** consider **English** as a **foreign language**, but rather as a **contact language** used to communicate between individuals from different linguacultural background and to talk about common interests and passions (hip hop, online blogs and games, TV series, social networks, etc.)

The study: some findings ^{2/3}

qualitative data

- *“When I want to cut out my mother from what we are saying, I speak with her (his girlfriend) in English. My mother does not understand English” (couple Romanian-Italian)*
- *I speak English with my mother when I want nobody around us to understand what we are saying”*
- *“If something happens in real life and I recall a sentence in English from comics, I use the same expression to create a feeling with other people: you can understand it only if you know the same comics”*
- *“As young people we very often use English expressions as everyday we get in contact with a multicultural reality where the English language serves as an important unifying factor among people from different mother tongues”*
- *“On the web we use English to comment a video on Youtube, play online games, get information, etc.”*
- *“A foreign language makes you feel a different person and this can make you feel more confident than in your own mother tongue”*
- *“I can open up more when I speak English”*
- *“ I can express my feelings better when I write in English”*
- *“I often use English as a way of breaking the rules, as a way of transgression when I’m with my friends”*
- *“The English we learn at school is not meant to favour a communication between us”*



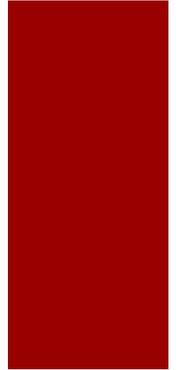
The study: conclusion ^{3/3}

the circle
(the others)

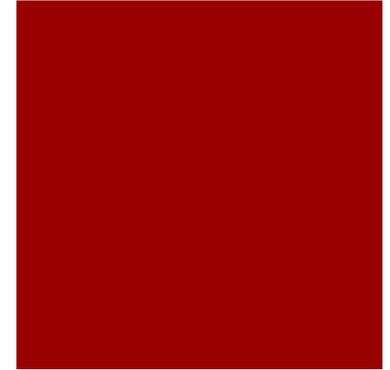
- deciding inclusion/exclusion
- creating new belongings

the mirror
(the self)

- perceiving/performing a new self

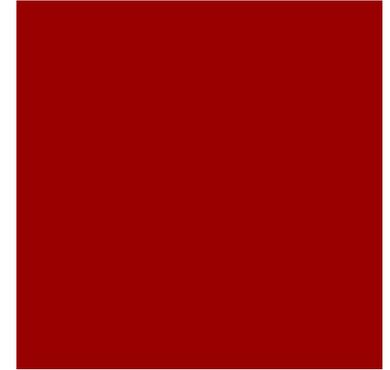


What do these data tell us about the students' relation with *other* languages?



- the experience of a foreign language **emerges** as an **intercultural practice** from below
- students **use the Foreign Language** to adopt a **series of strategies**:
- they **learn to negotiate** between **conventions** and dominant uses VS individual **appropriations**
- they reflect, but also play, **on the liminal spaces** between their **personal** and **social role**
- they are aware of the **opportunities**, new **voices** and **roles** offered by the FL

What do these data tell us as language teachers?

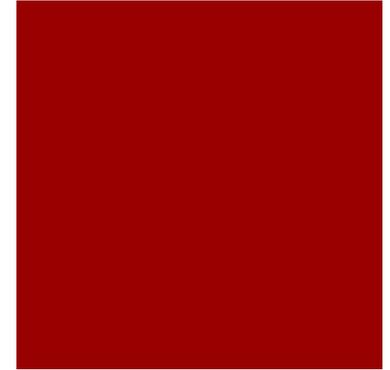


- **a much needed critical and intercultural approach to FLE**
- to **help** students **recognize** and **critically analyze** all different elements that constitute the comprehension and the production of linguistic actions in context and how these elements are **socio-culturally (re)produced**
- to **encourage** students to **understand** how “culture ... permeates and shapes behaviour, interactions and language choices” (Holmes 2014)
- to **focus** on the **intrinsic intercultural quality** of Foreign Language Education
- to **observe** how **identity** and **alterity** are **(re)produced** as well as they can be **reshaped** or **subverted** by the languages and the styles available

English Language Education

1/2

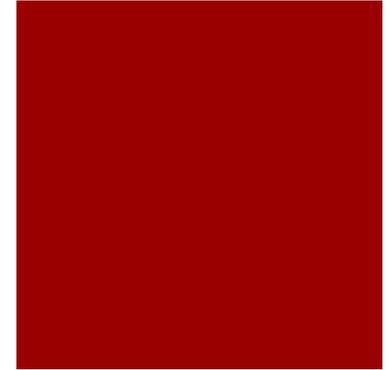
- New **openings** and new **responsibilities**; new **challenges** and **opportunities**:
- **macro context**: “ (...) the application of **cultural linguistics methods to varieties of English** is of immediate relevance to the field of **intercultural communication**” (Polzenhagen & Wolf 2007)
- **socio-political issues**: “**just teach the language**” is not an option as “language policies shape **classroom practices** and practices, in turn, shape **policies**” (Ramanathan & Morgan 2009)
- **meta-cultural competence**: “Speakers of English as an International Language **need to develop** (...) a **meta-cultural competence**, based on exposure to **various cultural conceptualizations**” (Sharifian 2007)



English Language Education

2/2

- to **identify specific characteristics** of English (the **EFL/ELF debate**, a **critical approach to global English (es)**, top-down **instructions** vs bottom-up **appropriations**, etc.)
- to **foreground** the fact that English is exposed to **various cultural conceptualizations** and is **in/formed by different cultures**, so that it can offer the **opportunity to develop a meta-cultural awareness** which can at turn favour an **intercultural communication**
- to **realize complexity** and the **post-normative condition**



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