EMBRACING LANGUAGE AWARENESS
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TARGETING LANGUAGE OWNERSHIP AND AWARENESS WITH AUTHENTIC USES OF ENGLISH

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The present paper describes a 12-week content-based course implemented with a class of secondary school students in Italy that aimed to enhance the levels of language ownership and awareness via authentic uses of English. The themes of exclusion and exile – viewed from historical and contemporary standpoints – served as a springboard for class discussions and debates, and inspired the development of collaborative, multimodal final projects shared on Write4Change, an international virtual writing community. After reporting on language attitude and ownership data collected with an entry questionnaire that informed the course design, this paper describes the four phases of the course in detail and presents an overview of ways in which authenticity was embedded within the course. Favorable student responses to the course and its successful implementation, notwithstanding contextual constraints such as limited access to technology, make replication of this course in other learning settings both feasible and worthwhile.

1 Introduction

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, language learning experiences are often limited to decontextualized, form-focused activities devoid of real-world relevance and opportunities for genuine practice in target language (TL) use. As Littlewood (2011) explains, "students are sometimes given a steady diet of activities such as 'planning a party' that will never take place or 'giving directions to the station' on the map of a non-existent town" (p. 553). Learners who are accustomed to these types of tasks and form-focused instruction learn to perform well under controlled conditions and excel at exhibiting explicit knowledge of grammar rules and at uttering formulaic, grammatically-correct sentences but they struggle to use their TL for unstructured communication beyond the walls of the classroom. If a person is unable to use the language to communicate in real-world settings, as Ozverir, Herrington and Osam (2016, p. 485) assert, "then it cannot be said that the person *has* the language".

In its May 2018 proposal for a comprehensive approach to language teaching and learning, the European Commission foregrounds language awareness, supported by digital tools and content-language integration, to improve language competence across Member States. To this end, instruction should aim to bridge the gap between 'scholastic' and real-world English by affording language learners more opportunities to practice authentic TL communication using innovative tools. Rather than instilling in learners the unrealistic and futile compulsion to sound like native speakers (NSs) of an English-speaking community, language learning should empower learners to become competent and agentive users of English. When this is achieved, learners can attain awareness – in the forms of language, intercultural, and learning awareness – that sanctions them to claim ownership of their TL (Rüschoff, 2018). In turn, instilling a greater sense of TL ownership augments feelings of legitimacy, competence, and willingness to communicate.

The present paper reports on a 12-week content-based course connected to a virtual writing community that was modeled on authentic learning and designed to instill in students an increased sense of language ownership and awareness. After the description of the analysis of language attitude and ownership data collected via an entry questionnaire that informed the course design, the four phases of the course are detailed and an overview of ways in which authenticity was embedded within the course design is presented. Then, the paper analyzes students' feedback to the course and makes the case for its replication.

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2 Course design and implementation

The course was initiated by request of the headmaster of a science-focused upper secondary school located in a small city in southern Italy who was interested in exposing students to content-based learning[1]. The content teacher, who taught Italian language and literature, lent the course content, which was grounded in the work and historical context of Ugo Foscolo but was more explicitly based on the emergent themes of self-exile, forced exile, and exclusion. Hence, the subject officially associated with the course notwithstanding, the content area most germane to these themes was social studies (history and current events).

The author of the present paper – an American-English-speaking researcher – led the course for 1 to 2 hours a week for a 12-week period from February to May 2018. Prior to this engagement, she had acted as a visiting instructor in the school, conducting a pilot that connected students to Write4Change, a virtual writing community committed to linking students worldwide who use their writing to enact change.

Consequently, the course was designed to integrate content, English as a vehicular language, and Write4Change. It was implemented with 24 students enrolled in their fourth year of upper secondary studies. A third of the students were female and the students' ages ranged from 17 to 19. According to their English teacher, the students' English proficiency level was on average between A2 and B1 of the CEFR scale. Yet, there was a notable variation in English knowledge across students: at one end of the proficiency spectrum one student was preparing for an English C2-level exam while, at the other end, a few students struggled to carry on a simple conversation in English.

2.1 Language attitudes and ownership

At the start of the course, students were given an entry questionnaire that delved into participant attitudes towards English, their identification with the language, and their sense and understanding of language ownership. Twenty-one students completed the questionnaire.

As illustrated in Figure 1, all participants indicated that they liked English. Word frequency analyses performed with *AntConc*, a software package for linguistic analysis of texts, of the open-ended responses to why they

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[1] In particular, the headmaster was interested in exposing students to CLIL. The course, however, cannot be categorized as CLIL according to the mandates dictated by the Italian Ministry of Education for several reasons. First, the content area was linked to Italian language and literature and CLIL involves the teaching of non-language content matter (Devos, 2016). Moreover, while CLIL courses are normally led by content teachers, at times with the support of the vehicular language teachers (see Grandinetti, Langellotti & Ting, 2013), in this case the module was taught by an external figure because the content teacher had not received prior CLIL training and she did not feel that she had adequate English knowledge to teach the course.

liked English indicated that among the most frequently used words were 'international' (8 occurrences), 'important' (5 occurrences) and 'easier/easy' (4 occurrences), which suggests that participants appreciated that English was a language used for global communication, they viewed its knowledge as important (to participate in global domains and for their future), and they thought the language was easier (in its grammatical structure) than Italian.
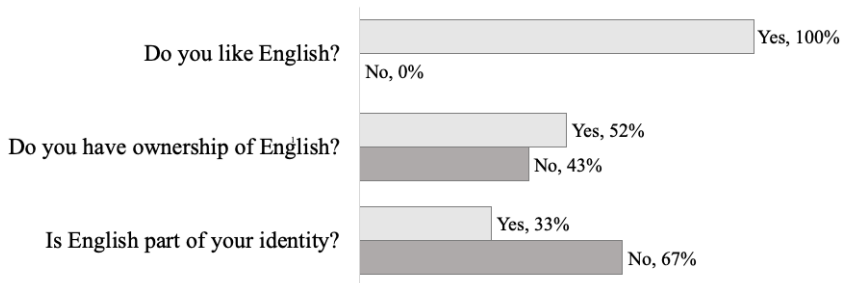
Fig. 1 - Responses to 'entry questionnaire' items (percentages)

This pronounced tendency did not transpire in responses to other items. Roughly half of participants[2] indicated that they had ownership of English. When prompted to describe what ownership of English entails, almost all participants grounded their responses in terms of language expertise (Rampton, 1990), or command of the language. For instance, one student who said that he did not have ownership of English explained: "I think that someone has ownership of English when he can speak it simply and fluently". These findings therefore suggest that half of the students felt that they did not have adequate command of English.

Then, two thirds of participants indicated that they did not feel that English was part of their identities. The analysis of open-ended explanations for these responses using Seilhamer's (2015) framework for language ownership revealed that 9 participants defined their relationship with English in terms of *affective belonging*, or emotional attachment to a language, 8 participants expressed it in terms of *prevalent usage,* or the quantity and quality of language use, and 4 participants drew on *legitimate knowledge*, or (perceived) language proficiency. Specifically, 7 of the 9 participants who drew on *affective belonging* did so to justify why English was not part of their identities, exemplified by representative responses such as "[English is] the language of the world, not of my identity" or "Because I think that my identity is Italian, because I was born

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[2]   The sum of the responses to the prompt "Do you have ownership of English?" does not amount to 100% because one student inserted a third option, or "Hope so".

in Italy and I live in Italy". Half of the participants who drew on *prevalent usage* did so to explain that English was not part of their identities – for instance, "because in [the] South of Italy we don't speak this language a lot" – and the remaining half used it to justify why English was part of their identities, as in the following response: "because sometimes I need to communicate with people from [other] countries". With respect to *legitimate knowledge,* 3 students said that English was not part of their identities because of their lagging TL abilities and 1 student felt English was part of his identity because of his successful language examination outcomes.

In addition to the profound implications on the relationship between language and identity, which are beyond the scope of the present paper, these findings provided compelling insights that informed the course. Entry questionnaire responses suggest that students had positive attitudes towards English but they necessitated more opportunities to feel command of and competent in the language. The fact that some students associated only their mother tongue to their identity notwithstanding the role of English as an international lingua franca suggested that they could benefit from more experience using English as a lingua franca (ELF) to envision themselves as members of a global community – even a virtual one – who are legitimized to own English. In a similar vein, given that students who experienced the need to use English to communicate with others were more likely to identify with English than those who did not have exposure to the language in their surroundings, the benefits of organizing the classroom as a full English immersion experience became more evident. Then, the connections between proficiency and identification suggested that more emphasis should be placed not only on the development of TL competence but also on fostering opportunities for learners to set their own communicative goals and self-assess their performance based on authentic use scenarios. In short, these results attenuated attention to accuracy and NS norms within the course, and validated the emphasis of the course on TL communication based on principles of authenticity and the use of the international Write4Change community.

2.2 The four phases of the course

The course consisted of four phases. In the first phase, students were asked to reflect on their relationship to English, prompted by the entry questionnaire items. The instructor then asked students to what extent they thought English should be used within the course. Unsurprisingly given the aforementioned questionnaire results, the students shared that they preferred that in-class interactions occur exclusively in English so that they could practice speaking in their TL. The students also decided that course products would be developed

in English to reach a wider audience.

The second phase focused on writing for change. To this end, students were asked to peruse social media and the news for examples of this phenomenon. Stemming from this search, in class we viewed videos and discussed student responses in the aftermath of the school shooting in Parkland, Florida. Grounded in these and other concrete examples, this phase comprised the deliberation of ways in which writing can enact change and the identification of the characteristics of this type of writing.

In the third phase, students briefly described the content of Foscolo's literary work – and in particular excerpts of his epistolary novel *The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis* and his poem "A Zacinto" – in English to the instructor, since the reading and analysis of this literature occurred in the lessons led by the Italian teacher and were not explicitly a part of the course. The emphasis of this discussion was not the literary work per se but the emergent themes of exile and exclusion, and how these were relevant to and impacted on the students' lives and community. One of the main topics that transpired during this phase was migration to Italy. A nearby church hosted several refugees, among which a man from South Sudan whom had spoken, in English, to several students before he was invited to share his experiences at a school assembly. These interactions provided a tangible link to the larger national political discourse on migration and gave rise to in-class discussions on related threads including the historical underpinnings and resurgence of nationalism and anti-immigration sentiments in Italy, responses to the presence of migrants in students' immediate surroundings, episodes of and solutions to intolerance, among others. Students were then prompted to brainstorm ways in which they could integrate the (social studies and/or Italian literature) content with current events and their interests/concerns, and express these in a final project, which consisted in the development of student-driven, collaborative and multimodal products aimed at enacting change that would be posted on Write4Change and therefore shared with its participants from around the globe.

Thus, the final phase involved the articulation of the final project, including group work and discussions, in the form of workshopping in class. The class divided itself into four groups. A description of the final projects of each of the groups follows:

    a) The Italian teacher insisted that at least one group take on Latin and Italian literature as the topic of their work. After a deliberate discussion, the group with the most positive attitudes towards Italian agreed to focus on this topic. Its members developed a PowerPoint presentation – chosen as a mode because, in the words of a group member, it was "more simple" and "engaging" than a "boring" essay – in which the theme of exile was explored through the lives and writings of Cicero,

Dante, and Foscolo.

b) Another group developed a PowerPoint presentation on exile in the history of Israel. When asked why they chose this topic, a group member responded that it was "*una cosa alternativa*" – or something different – and another added "because it's happening. We're talking about a contemporary episode of our history and it's very important." This group was interested in exploring the psychological front of the experience of exile and diaspora, and presented what they termed "significant and overwhelming" issues faced by this population.

c) The third group created a video arising from their encounter with the aforementioned South Sudanese refugees. After having articulated what they had learned from the refugees' stories, group members shifted their focus to community perception since, as they wrote in the introduction to their video, the refugees "had a nice welcome but not everyone want[s] them" to reside in their community. The students therefore interviewed their classmates to delve into their opinions on immigration into Italy in general and the experience of the South Sudanese family, as well as their views on the refugees' permanence in their community.

d) The fourth group, also inspired by the plight of migrants, focused on social injustice. They created a PowerPoint presentation in which they spotlighted discrimination on the grounds of race and sexual orientation, and also honed in on (cyber)bullying. Subsequent to the description of each of these concepts, the students proposed solutions to these large social issues. For instance, they proposed that schools should address social injustice head on, suggesting the following: "The teachers […] have the duty of informing, [sensitizing] and making their students understand that our social and mental barriers are just [a] product of ignorance and a limited [view] of reality".

During the last meeting of the course, the students presented their projects to their peers. These presentations culminated in a series of debates that combined historical, political, social, and economic considerations with students' opinions on how to enact change in their community. On that day, students also wrote a response to the course.

2.3 An outline of authenticity in the course

Ozverir *et al.* (2016) provide granularity to the concept of authenticity with a series of principles that constitute a framework for the design of authentic activities, outlined in Table 1. Several of these design principles were incorporated into the design of the course to advance authenticity and boost

opportunities for students to experience authentic language learning and use.

Table 1
FRAMEWORK FOR THE DESIGN OF AUTHENTIC LANGUAGE LEARNING ACTIVITIES
(Ozverir *et al.*, 2016, pp. 488-491)

Design Principle	Description
1	Authentic activities have real-world relevance
2	Authentic activities are complex and ill-defined
3	Authentic activities provide the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, using a variety of resources
4	Authentic activities provide the opportunity to collaborate
5	Authentic activities provide the opportunity to reflect
6	Authentic activities lead beyond domain- and skill-specific outcomes
7	Authentic activities are seamlessly integrated with assessment
8	Authentic activities yield polished products valuable in their own right rather than as preparation for something else
9	Authentic activities allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome
10	Authentic activities are conducive to both learning and communicating
11	Authentic activities provide motivational factors

In particular, some of the ways in which authenticity was embedded within the design of the course follow:

Meaningful content. In content-based classrooms, students engage in appropriate language-dependent activities that explore interesting content and are neither artificial nor meaningless exercises (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). Content-based instruction fosters functional and authentic uses of the TL as students complete tasks and respond to issues that content areas raise (Rüschoff, 2018). The course prompted students to produce output in English to express their knowledge of literature, history, and current events; to assimilate English input from instructor-provided media, Write4Change and their research; and to integrate their content and language knowledge meaningfully in the development of final projects. Expression, assimilation and integration of content via students' TL mimic real-life situations in which language is used to communicate in unstructured and purposeful, useful, and functional ways.

Personalized content. In addition to content-based knowledge, the driving force of the course was personalized content, which provides learner authenticity[3] and is more engaging, meaningful and substantial than assigned content (Littlewood, 2011). First, the only guidelines for final projects were to write for change, work collaboratively, and share products with the Write4Change community. Even though the members of one group were compelled to embed Latin and Italian literature into their project, all groups had the freedom to determine the format, resources and media to employ, the specific topic and content of their work, the ways their projects would

[3] Learner authenticity is "the idea that materials and learning initiatives need to be authenticated, that is, made real, given purpose and adopted by the learners themselves" (Rüschoff, 2018, p. 1).

enact change, the size and members of their groups, the language of their production, and so on. The students were therefore given – and were expected to take – ownership of the task. Then, by foregrounding student-generated opinions, concerns, and possible courses of action in all phases of the course, students gained access to and reflected on differing perspectives, and engaged in language use that was more relevant and motivating.

Working for Change: The focus on student-generated concerns for in-class discussions and tasks can be viewed as a manifestation of a critical literacy approach, which invites students to explore relationships among constructs such as language, power, identity and difference (Janks, 2010). Furthermore, language teaching and learning imply critical awareness since, as explained by Pennycook (2001, p. 176), they are always "an instrument and a resource for *change*, for challenging and changing the wor(l)d". When critical literacy and awareness are embraced, students become empowered social actors and language users who can more easily link their school-based learning to how knowledge and language are used in practice (Ozverir *et al.*, 2016).

Write4Change. Authentic learning flourishes with online intercultural exchange (Chen & Yang, 2014; Kohn, 2018). According to Chun, Kern and Smith (2016, p. 77), "communication technologies provide a means for language learners to become aware of, and actively reflect on, their own and others' communicative practices". Intercultural encounters facilitated by telecollaboration grant access to English use that, unlike the static NS norms recurrent in language textbooks, mirrors ELF models centered on communication.

A major issue faced in many global educational contexts is lack of access to the technology that facilitates online intercultural exchanges. This issue emerged in the setting of the present study as well. The class met at a subsidiary building which was distant from the main building of the school and had no computer labs. Although this limited access to technology precluded the chance for students to take advantage of all the features Write4Change had to offer while they were in class, the fact that the final projects were developed to be shared on the platform was sufficient for students to reap the benefits of intercultural exchange. Write4Change provided an authentic language use scenario for students who became members of a primarily English-speaking virtual global community. Final projects were developed for Write4Change participants, mainly from the US and India, who served as a real international audience for students' writing. This, in turn, presented an authentic need for the use of English, the shared language.

Language in use. The language aim of the course did not center on accuracy and NS norms but on effective communication. In-person meetings were structured to provide students the opportunity to use English to discuss content

knowledge, express opinions, air grievances rooted in current events, and reflect on how change is enacted. This provided learning authenticity[4] and allowed students to experience language use for purposes other than school-based, teacher-prepared, structured exercises that practice language skills difficultly transferrable to real-world uses. Furthermore, by experiencing (successful) communication in English, students had the chance to self-assess their performance and, in many cases, feel command of and competent in their TL.

3 Learner Feedback

Learner feedback on the course was collected from 14 students. Handwritten, anonymous responses to the question "How was this experience? (include positive and negative aspects)" were typed and aggregated to form a 988-word corpus. The Word Cloud in Figure 2 represents the terms used at least three times in this small corpus[5].

Fig. 2 - Word Cloud of participant feedback

Word frequency analyses performed using *AntConc* revealed that the most frequently used adjectives after 'negative' and 'positive', which were part of the prompt, were 'different' (6 occurrences), 'useful' (6 occurrences), 'important' (5 occurrences), and 'interesting' (4 occurrences). Randomly selected excerpts of responses that include these four key terms (underlined) follow:

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[4] Learning authenticity is "non-simulated, genuine, purposeful, and real-goal oriented language use in the classroom" (Rüschoff, 2018, p. 1).

[5] The following words were combined into a single entry: 'aspect' and 'aspects', 'learn' and 'learned', 'speak' and 'speaking', and 'study' and 'studied'. Words included in the prompt, such as 'experience', 'positive' and 'negative' were deleted from the word list.

> Finally, something <u>different</u>! Even if Italian is not included in the range of my favourite subjects, dealing with an Italian poet using English language was, most of all, encouraging but also really inspiring and motivational.

> We finally have worked on something in English that isn't literature; or the sheet of a professor with some exercises for the middle school guys. […] It was [a] fantastic, <u>useful</u>, and important experience, [to which] I would dedicate more time.

> [It] was very positive for me because I think that English is very <u>important</u> for us and for our future. […] I hope that next year we'll have a similar project in our school so we'll have the opportunity to learn more.

> In my opinion, this experience was very stimulating. I think that [to] study a subject in a different language is an opportunity to see the subject in another point of view. It was very <u>interesting</u> and also I learned to speak English more fluently.

What transpires from these and other responses is, first of all, that students appreciated that the course distinguished itself from other school-based experiences in general, and TL learning activities in particular. Students perceived the utility of the course since it allowed for more practice in English but it also captured their interest.

Participants were also asked to indicate the negative aspects of the course and all of the students who provided a response stated that more time should have been allotted, and several students also mentioned that they would like to repeat this experience with content from a scientific subject.

Conclusions

In the course described in this paper, content-based learning was enacted to create real-world and interdisciplinary connections within the realm of the humanities for students at a science-focused secondary school. This school type likely attracts students who prefer scientific subjects, and scientific content lends itself well to content-based learning. Yet, arguably, it is precisely in these educational contexts in which innovative pedagogical approaches should be used in the humanities. As seen in this study, this course allowed the content to become more germane, stimulating and, ultimately, meaningful for students. Students in fact responded positively, viewing the course as a welcome change to traditional learning that was motivating and useful, and they lamented that it did not last longer. Although CLIL should not be implemented with language content such as Italian language and literature, modules that incorporate content-

based learning such as the one described in this paper may serve as rewarding and worthwhile practice for secondary students that can better prepare them for full-fledged CLIL courses and future EMI courses at university.

Moreover, EFL students need competences, strategies, and confidence to communicate successfully with speakers of different English varieties, for different purposes, and in different settings. The course presented in the present paper takes the needs of language users today into account. Given chances to use the language authentically allows learners to gain greater awareness, including getting a clearer picture of the gap and the steps to take to close the gap between their current and desired language-speaking selves (Kohn, 2018), which instills autonomy and ownership.

The course used English as a vehicular language through which students expressed not only their content knowledge but also reached a wider audience and aired their opinions on current affairs. Indeed, notwithstanding limited access to computers, exploiting a virtual community of international writers as the audience of their work was enough to create an authentic language use scenario for students' final projects. Thus, the final project, designed to make learners actively involved in – and acclimated to – meaningful communication in English, became an authentic task geared towards real-life experiences.

The small class size, the use of a single-institution study, and the lack of a control group inhibit the generalization of these findings. However, the course format is easily replicable notwithstanding contextual constraints such as limited access to technology, so it is hoped that its replication occurs in different contexts. In light of the evidence of success reported in this paper, such replication can contribute to the improvement and reshaping of future language learning scenarios that foreground authentic learning.

Acknowledgments

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